

# Turning the Page

Gendered Identities in Contemporary  
Literary and Visual Cultures



Edited by Gyuris • Szép • Vecsernyés

L'Harmattan

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Gendered Identities in  
Contemporary Literary  
and Visual Cultures

JUDIT FRIEDRICH  
SERIES EDITOR

ELTE PAPERS IN  
ENGLISH STUDIES

KATA GYURIS, ESZTER SZÉP, DÓRA VECSEKNYÉS  
EDITORS

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## Gendered Identities in Contemporary Literary and Visual Cultures

L'Harmattan

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JUDIT FRIEDRICH

## SERIES EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

This volume of essays is organized around the theme “Gendered Identities in Contemporary Literary and Visual Cultures” and collects the best papers presented at the inaugural conference of the Narratives of Culture and Identity Research Group at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), in Budapest, June 5-6, 2015. We hope that the erudition of the participants, the enthusiasm of the organizers, and the energy of the conference will be palpable throughout the volume and will offer a rewarding experience for readers interested in innovative research rooted in literary and visual studies.

The research group behind the conference had been formed at ELTE at the end of 2014. The founders and most members were doctoral students who came to the conclusion that the solitary work of writing one's dissertation is beautifully complemented by workshops and common projects. Their mutual inspiration included, and continued beyond, the conference and the edition of this volume. At the time, they were the only independent, grass-roots research group among the doctoral students at the School of English and American Studies, ELTE Faculty of Humanities. Their initiative has since been followed by others, but their work and inspiration are still among the proudest moments of the Modern English and American Literature and Culture Program of the ELTE Doctoral School of Literary Studies, hosted by the Department of English Studies within SEAS, ELTE.

The leaders of the research group, Eszter Szép and Kata Gyuris, made the decision to establish an organized doctoral research community in Košice at the 2014 international conference of the European Society for the Study of English. The group's focus was to be on up-to-date research, academic courage, and inventive

forms of cooperation. The group has been open to fellow doctoral students from other universities within Hungary, and they invited guest speakers from around the country to their workshops. The most ambitious project, however, has been the organization of an international conference and the edition of the current volume, for which Dóra Vecsernyés and Bence Bodó, doctoral students from DES, were invited to provide editorial work and create the layout of the book.

The current volume contains the fully written versions of the best pieces presented at the conference, aiming to provide stimulating impetus for new readers and a reminder to all of us how much there is to celebrate as long as intellectual research is pursued. Congratulations are due to all editors and contributors on their initiative, independence, and ability to bring their plans to fruition. As series editor as well as advisor to the research group and thesis advisor to several of the members, I wish them the best of luck in all their future projects, and hope that universities will remain places of independent study and research, that they will continue to nurture talent, foster intellectual adventures, and create a safe environment for thinking. I hope these young scholars will continue to demonstrate how much they can contribute to this process.





# KATA GYURIS & ESZTER SZÉP (EDITORS)

## EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

When the idea to organize a conference on contemporary gender representation was first conceived by a couple of enthusiastic PhD students and their thesis supervisor, we would not have thought that the outcome would be such a diverse collection of essays. The conference itself already, organized on June 5-6, 2015 in Budapest, Hungary, turned out to be versatile beyond expectations. During the two days, questions on gender were examined in various media such as literature, film, theatre, comics, and television; and thought-provoking arguments stimulated heated discussions during the panels – it was not unusual that these discussions ran well over into the coffee breaks. We were happy to see such an international crowd gather in this Central European setting and enthusiastically respond to one another's research.

It was this animated vibe that convinced us to collect selected papers from the conference and to assemble this volume. With the title, *Turning the Page: Gendered Identities in Contemporary Literary and Visual Cultures*, we would like to open a new platform for Hungarian and international PhD students and young researchers to share and discuss their ideas. We strongly feel that cooperation and thinking together, in this case on gender, help nourish not only academic collaboration, but provide motivation for individual research as well.

The papers selected often combine novel approaches with more traditional perspectives. We decided to divide the papers into three larger chapters based on their way of tackling issues of gender. The first chapter, "Dissecting Identities," scrutinizes female identity through European and non-European cultural and

literary traditions, offering subtle portrayals of women and men in contemporary reworkings of various historical contexts. Dóra Vecsernyés's article explores the specific narrative and typographical tools applied by contemporary Scottish author Janice Galloway in *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* – a novel anatomizing the female body and mind – and shows how the culturally-encoded and societally-reinforced narratives of gender and personhood affect the novel's central character. Tegan Raleigh's paper engages with Assia Djebar's reworking of Scheherazade's tale and puts it in the context of Algeria's difficult transition from colonial rule, all the while focusing on questions of the transforming power of translation, female authorship, and the interrelatedness of female voice and agency in a postcolonial setting. The next paper, by Emma Bálint, also takes a postmodern fairy tale as its subject and examines the gendered dependency between the *fille fatale*, the girl on the way to womanhood, and the wolf in David Slade's film, *Hard Candy*. Maria Antonietta Struzziero's paper, which closes this section, offers a comparative analysis of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* and Jeannette Winterson's *Passion*, highlighting the ever-gendered representation of Venice in the context of masculinized conquest, at the same time paying meticulous attention to the many intertextual ventures of the two texts.

The three papers in the second section, "Creating Social Identities," all focus on the interrelatedness of social roles and the possibilities of establishing a unified notion of selfhood in comparative readings. Kornél Zípernovszky approaches the autobiographies of Ethel Waters and Billie Holiday as collaborative works, and draws attention to the ways the narrative identity of the black female autobiographical subject is shaped by the white male ghost writers' positioning of it. Pavlina Doublekova's paper on two contemporary Bulgarian plays, both taking the mother figure as their subject matter, scrutinizes the status of art in a postcommunist setting, and considers the long-term repercussions of socialist appropriations of notions of motherhood in the Balkans. In the last paper of this chapter, Kata Gyuris presents the arduous process of coming of age through the narratives of two young African girls, pointing out the importance of male and female spaces, as well as the possibilities and limits of transgressing these in the two protagonists' quests for selfhood on the verge of Africa and the Western world.

The papers in the third chapter, "Reinventing Gender Roles," deal with cultural products which open up new interpretations of gendered identities and propose

potentially subversive readings. Fanni Feldmann looks at the first gay character in Hungarian popular television from the end of the 1980s, Mr. Oli, who represents a disruptive force in the socialist patriarchal ethos, while, as the author duly notes, retaining most of its masculinized values. Krisztina Kitti Tóth follows a similar path in her reading of Michèle Roberts's *Flesh and Blood*, where she focuses on the protagonists' balancing between gender roles, the way they oscillate among expectations, and how they eventually find a way to position their identities along a strictly defined path. Eva Hanna argues for the subversive power of reality television by concentrating on *Jersey Shore* and its spin-offs, looking at how traditional gender roles and positions are performed and reinterpreted by the protagonists of the shows. Zsuzsanna Nagy-Szalóki takes a different turn by choosing A. S. Byatt's *The Children's Book* as her paper's subject, both highlighting and challenging Victorian notions of male and female spaces along with convictions about female authorship and creativity, and at the same time drawing attention to the fragmented and intertextual nature of not only Byatt's novel but of Victorian notions of womanhood as well.

This collection of articles offers different ways of interpreting gendered identities in contemporary culture, while also focusing on the subtleties of what gender can mean today. We aimed to showcase the various fascinating directions in which gender studies can take us as well as to bring together researchers from various academic backgrounds. We hope that this collection preserves something of the spirit of the conference and that you will keep on turning the pages.





# I DISSECTING IDENTITIES



DÓRA VECSENYÉS

## The Weightlessness of Non-Existence Anatomising the Female Self in Janice Galloway's *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*

In her introduction to a collection of short stories by Scottish women writers, contemporary Scottish author Janice Galloway (b. 1955) reflects on the position of Scottish women: “There is coping with that guilt of taking time off the corners of national politics to get concerned with the sexual sort: that creeping fear it’s somehow self-indulgent to be more concerned for one’s womanness instead of one’s Scottishness, one’s working-class heritage, whatever.”<sup>1</sup> It is precisely this female experience that Galloway’s oeuvre is permeated with, discussed with a focus on the problem of female agency and the female self as embedded in the male-dominated culture of Scotland. Her autobiographical pieces *This is Not About Me* (2008) and *All Made Up* (2012) depict Galloway’s childhood and teenage years, and provide insight into the formation of a female self in working-class Scotland. Similarly, her short story collections *Blood* (1991), *Where You Find It* (1996), and *Jellyfish* 2015, offer a multitude of in-depth glances at women’s individual experiences and relationships both in the domestic and in the public spheres of Scotland. Although moving away from the Scottish setting, Galloway’s fictional biography of Clara Schumann, entitled *Clara* (2002), also demonstrates her preoccupation with the coordination of the various roles of women as daughters, wives, mothers, and

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1 Janice Galloway, “Introduction,” in *Meantime: Looking forward to the Millennium* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1991), 2-7, pp. 5-6.

professionals, while it also reveals her interest in female artists and canonisation—still a somewhat pressing issue for women writers.

In terms of Galloway's novels, it is her debut piece *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* (1989) that offers the most nuanced representation of the female psyche and body. This novel presents the first-person narrative of Joy Stone, a 27-year-old Glaswegian schoolteacher, who suffers from severe depression and eating disorders after the traumatic experience of witnessing her married lover Michael drown, and who is eventually admitted into a psychiatric ward where she receives insufficient care. As revealed in a television interview, Galloway created Joy Stone's voice by taking "everything possible away from her" in order to see "if you're entirely alone [...] what [it is] that keeps you going?"<sup>2</sup> Moreover, she inhabited Joy's perspective through imaging "what [it would] be like for food to be threatening, for the ordinary things around you threatening" and what it would feel like "if the table itself were threatening, if the people around you were threatening."<sup>3</sup> Here, I aim to demonstrate how this interest of Galloway's in Joy's bodily sensations and mental processes fuels the novel itself, so that the text anatomises the female self, offering deep insight into its components and inner workings.

*The Trick is to Keep Breathing* is characterised by a highly fragmented structure and temporal non-linearity, along with a careful withholding and measuring out of information. The narrative is constructed of the narrator Joy's sensory and other bodily experiences; self-reflexive comments regarding her mental state; dream-like passages of remembering set in italics, semi-verbalised thoughts floating off the page, and missing page numbers indicating critical mental states. We are also presented with Joy's lists prepared in order to avoid forgetting, as well as glimpses into the magazine articles and horoscopes Joy reads, including an excerpt from a self-help book on coping with death. The unorthodox typography and layout that characterise much of Galloway's writing have their first occurrence in this novel, and later return in *Foreign Parts* (1994) and the aforementioned *Clara*, making her texts difficult to quote. Importantly, these experimental formal and structural tools are presumably employed by Galloway consciously, with the aim of illustrating her subject matter and her narrator's mental processes and psychological states. In the case of *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, this subject matter

2 Janice Galloway, "Interview by Jenny Brown," *Off The Page*, dir. Erina Rayner, (21 October 1990), *STV People YouTube Channel*, accessed 18 August 2015.

3 Janice Galloway, "Interview by Jenny Brown."

is the composite female self, its multimodal representation, and the possibilities of anatomising it and coordinating its multiple components in a single narrative.

When it comes to representing the workings of the human mind or to conceptualising and anatomising human selfhood, narratives seem to be applicable, especially in our age when narratives are so much in the focus. According to Paul Ricoeur, it is narrative that provides the most suitable framework for identity and identity construction, as it echoes “the temporal dimension of human existence” and “personal identity.”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, “[s]elf-sameness, ‘self-constancy’” and the “dynamic” nature of identity can be co-ordinated within a narrative—that is, a narrative allows for the development and changes of one’s identity, while also being centred on the same narrator, the same self.<sup>5</sup> Narrative identity is, then, formed out of the factual or fictional stories told by the narrating self, consciously or unconsciously, to others or to him/herself. As a result, the subject functions both “as a reader and the writer of its own life,” and life can be seen as “a cloth woven of stories told.”<sup>6</sup> In the case of *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, what is put to the test is how that central core, the narrating self, can be (re)created and maintained amidst the cacophony of narratives generated inside and outside the self. In many ways, this novel is in line with Ricoeur’s notion that “literature proves to consist in a vast laboratory for thought experiments in which the resources of variation encompassed by narrative identity are put to the test of narration.”<sup>7</sup> Galloway’s text, in turn, raises the following questions: which aspects of the self in terms of the body-mind dichotomy are involved in the process of disintegration? How is this disintegration representable textually and visually? How is the female self embedded in the multidimensional web of identities surrounding it and in its present-day cultural context? How can disintegration be overcome and the self re-created (if at all), and what does this tell us concerning the workings of narrative identity?

According to feminist critics, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* can be read as a manifestation of Hélène Cixous’s concept of *écriture féminine*, since through

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4 Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 114.

5 Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, vol. 3 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 246.

6 Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, p. 246.

7 Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, p. 240.

the employment of postmodernist techniques like fragmentation and pastiche it offers a visual representation of Joy's anorexic body. For instance, in her essay entitled "I Didn't Need to Eat': Janice Galloway's Anorexic Text and the National Body," Mary McGlynn interprets the novel's structure and special layout as embodying the narrator's eating disorders.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, the disrupted temporal structure and all the withheld information may make the text an anorexic one, as it "starves the reader" instead of leaving the reader "nourished with enough information to sustain and encourage him or her" to read on.<sup>9</sup> McGlynn also shows that the text can be considered bulimic, as it uses a "variety of forms" such as magazine articles and signs on walls, and presents these fragments of texts in "undigested chunks," typeset as they are seen by Joy, echoing the process of regurgitation.<sup>10</sup> While I consider such analyses of the text as illustrative of the body and bodily phenomena to be revealing, I believe that in this case it is rather Joy's mental disorder that fuels both her bodily and textual representations, especially since anorexia and bulimia themselves are, strictly speaking, diseases of the psyche—which is why they are both included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* of the American Psychiatric Association.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, as the recurring refrain-like line of the novel highlights, "[y]ou can't get out of the inside of your own head" (unnumbered 68),<sup>12</sup> which is exactly what the reader experiences, being confined to the narrator's mind and witnessing the narrator's struggles. Therefore, I argue that it is in fact Joy's mental state and the operation of her consciousness that are reflected in the book's special typography and fragmented layout, making it an embodiment of the narrator's mind and a model for the narrative representation of consciousness and mental disorder. In this respect, then, instead of the textual-visual representation of Joy's body, it is rather the body's mental representation in Joy's narrative identity that is of interest.

As mentioned above, the trigger for Joy's mental disintegration is a traumatic experience. She is haunted by scraps of memory resurfacing in her mind,

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8 Mary McGlynn, "I Didn't Need to Eat': Janice Galloway's Anorexic Text and the National Body," *Critique* 49.2 (2008), 221–236.

9 McGlynn, p. 226.

10 McGlynn, p. 230.

11 *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fifth Edition (Washington and London: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013).

12 All parenthesised references are to this edition: Janice Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* (London: Minerva, 1991).

presented in the form of dream-like passages, italicised to indicate a different state of mind or level of consciousness. It is based on these highly elliptic fragments that the reader can gradually piece together Joy's past. In addition to the trauma itself, however, there is something that induces further mental problems: namely, the way society treats her in the aftermath of Michael's death. A crucial, often quoted, scene that reveals the roots of Joy's mental problems takes place at Michael's memorial service. Here, parallel to the Reverend's unfolding speech set in capital letters on the left side of the page, we are provided with Joy's silent mental reactions on the right, and so we can observe the immediate impacts on Joy's sense of self. When the decisive moment comes, we find the following:

EXTEND OUR SYMPATHIES, OUR  
HEARTS AND OUR LOVE

the arms stretching further  
like Jesus commanding  
Lazarus

ESPECIALLY OUR LOVE

a split-second awareness that  
something terrible was about  
to about to [sic]

TO HIS WIFE AND FAMILY

happen (unnumbered 79)

That is, the terrible event to come is that the Reverend expresses his sympathies only to Michael's wife and family, leaving Joy out of the equation. Thus, Joy's actual self is not acknowledged here; instead, she is identified—or, in other words, re-narrated—by the outside world as *mistress*, although the label itself is never used explicitly. Reduced and confined to this stereotypical category, which is not compatible with the traditional system of marriage, she is also denied the right to mourn.

By contrasting the two viewpoints visually as well, Galloway underlines their sharp opposition. The way Joy's internal voice is set apart from the characters surrounding her indicates her isolation, which at this point can be attributed to these people's attitude. Additionally, this arrangement might also foreshadow the way Joy's isolation subsequently becomes intensified when she is bracketed off from the *normal* world because of her mental disorder and is eventually institutionalised.



On the other hand, since it is set in capital letters, it is the Reverend's voice that dominates over Joy's silent reflections set in lowercase. Importantly, the Reverend seems to vocalise the general opinion of those present, as well as that of society and the church. As revealed later, Joy's involvement was heavily controlled from the moment Michael's family found out about his death. Accordingly, when his body was moved back from Spain, "[h]e had been reappropriated. He was not my business. He would come back to other people" (118). That is, through this reappropriation the status quo preceding Michael's death gets overwritten retroactively, as if his relationship with Joy and the act of leaving his family had not taken place. Joy, in turn, finds this pretence disturbing, as it is indicated by her comment on being allowed to go to the funeral: "*The pretence that my presence or absence were someone else's to decide. It was also a reminder they might make life difficult if I didn't play along [...] I waited all the time to see what was permissible. If I was permissible*" (119).

When discussing how the self is positioned both in time and space during the process of identity construction, Wolfgang Kraus highlights the role of positioning in social space, that is, how people constantly negotiate and re-negotiate which social groups they are members of, and which groups or spaces they are excluded from.<sup>13</sup> Importantly, the memberships and exclusions making up a person's social identity are not merely a matter of personal choice or "self-positioning," but are also governed by how the person is positioned by others.<sup>14</sup> This "other-positioning" may "allow, emphasize" the person's identity position, but it may also "put [it] into doubt" or lead to stereotyping and deprivation of certain rights; thus, it may play a self-threatening role.<sup>15</sup> When Joy is put into the stereotypical category of *mistress* and is not allowed to mourn, she is exposed precisely to this self-threatening effect of other-positioning. Having been repeatedly disregarded since Michael's death, Joy interprets the Reverend's symbolic action at the memorial thus: "The Rev Dogsbody had chosen this service to perform a miracle" of "[getting] rid of the ground-in stain [...] And the stain was me. I didn't exist. The miracle had wiped me out" (unnumbered 79). By being written out of the official

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<sup>13</sup> Wolfgang Kraus, "The Quest for a Third Space: Heterotopic Self-Positioning and Narrative Identity," in *Rethinking Narrative Identity: Persona and Perspective*, eds Claudia Holler and Martin Klepper (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2013), 69-84, pp. 70-71.

<sup>14</sup> Kraus, p. 72.

<sup>15</sup> Kraus, p. 73.

narrative of Michael's life, Joy's own narrative identity is altered as well, since her self-positioning as Michael's partner is overwritten by others. It is as if her role in the narrative, herself as an agent, and her memories—key episodes of her narrative identity—were deprived of their validity and her own narrative were re-written, leaving Joy with a collapsed sense of self.

Since societal expectations and reactions induce such changes in Joy, it is worth taking a closer look at how she relates to them: how the concept of being good is defined for her by society, and how the need to measure up affects her. Initially, Joy tries to define herself through her job, since it is her primary means of being a useful member of society: "This is where I earn my definition, the place that tells me what I am" (11). However, as her psychological disturbances become more severe, she finds it increasingly difficult to function properly at her workplace: "No, work is not a problem. It never has been. I am the problem" (12). Her worries about malfunctioning and not being good enough culminate when one day she cannot go to work. As a sign of her frustration with not measuring up, we get an extensive list of what it means to be good. "I can't think how I fell into this unProtestant habit. I used to be so conscientious. I used to be so *good* all the time. [where **good = productive/hardworking/wouldn't say boo**] [...] People made jokes, I was so eager to please" (81, original emphases). As also observed by Glenda Norquay, Galloway pronounces harsh criticism of the Protestant work ethic through this exaggerated and ironic presentation.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, at Michael's funeral Joy does her best to meet expectations: "I was tasteful because I wanted people's approval. Good girls reap rewards. [where **good = neat, acting in a credit-worthy manner**] [...] Like everybody, I wanted to be loved" (82). However, acting this way requires hiding one's true reactions and behaviours. As Joy points out, "there was more going on below the surface. There always is" (82). Undoubtedly, Galloway's portrayal of Joy in this cultural context constitutes further criticism of the system in which being loved can only be achieved by acting out roles instead of being oneself.

The most conspicuous scene in which we see Joy's attempts at meeting expectations is probably her bathing ritual. Here, Joy goes through a lengthy process of making her body look desirable, systematically editing each and every segment of

16 Glenda Norquay, "Janice Galloway's Novels: Fraudulent Mooching," in *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers*, eds Aileen Christianson and Alison Lumsden (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 131-143, pp. 137-138.

her body based on the guidelines she reads in women's magazines. Accordingly, she is expected to "work on [her] awareness" by repeating the mantras "I'm Young, Dynamic, Today's Woman. I'm Multi-Orgasmic" (193). Note how the key values to focus on are written with capital letters, emphasising the instructive nature of these guidelines. The aim is, ultimately, to please, as signalled by phrases like "in case this is what he prefers," tinting her face to cover her paleness because it is "unappetising and nothing to kiss," or avoiding red lipstick as it "may make him cautious" (47-48). By the end, there emerges a problem of visibility: as her original self is almost completely cleaned away or covered up, Joy is not seen as herself, but as the body she puts together. A collection of body parts each perfected, those heavily edited photos of women in advertisements offering segments of their bodies to the male spectator, whose gaze has been theorised by Laura Mulvey.<sup>17</sup> Importantly, when the appearance of Joy's body is so thoroughly changed according to social expectations, her mental representation of her body is altered as well. Namely, she no longer sees herself as a whole, but is left with a rather fragmented perception of her body, seeing it as "a jumble of separate parts" (48). As other critics have also pointed out, Galloway here criticises consumerism and its impact on women's images of themselves. In Douglas Gifford's words, it is "the marginalisation of our deepest selves amidst the pressures of contemporary society" that is portrayed by Galloway, rendering contemporary society and culture as threatening for the self.<sup>18</sup>

At the memorial service, Joy experiences another severe symptom of self-erasure induced by society, which then becomes a theme permeating the entire novel: "The first symptom of non-existence is weightlessness" (unnumbered 79)—hence the title of the present paper. Weightlessness is featured both in the physical and the abstract sense; that is, Galloway depicts in Joy's figure the weightlessness of the body due to anorexia and bulimia, as well as the weightlessness of a mind floating without a stable sense of self. The experience of weightlessness is often paired with emptiness, most importantly when it comes to Joy's body. When one of the doctors at the psychiatric ward where Joy is institutionalised discovers that she no longer menstruates, he invites a gynaecologist to find out whether this

<sup>17</sup> See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16.3 (1975), 6-18.

<sup>18</sup> Douglas Gifford, "Contemporary Fiction II: Seven Writers in Scotland," in *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, eds Douglass Gifford and Dorothy McMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 604-629, p. 608.

is due to pregnancy. At first, Joy finds the scanning to be a means of reinforcing her existence: "This green cave was me. I make light on the screen therefore I am" (unnumbered 146), reformulating Descartes's ubiquitous statement. Here, Joy hopes that "[w]e might be doing more than discovering I exist: someone else might exist in there too" (unnumbered 146). Note, however, that even if it might be proved this way, her existence is indicated on the screen by a cave, an entity with emptiness in its centre. Indeed, as the doctor concludes, Joy is not pregnant; that is, she is empty. Now Joy comes to interpret the same image as showing her emptiness, or even non-existence: "I was still there. A black hole among the green stars. Empty space. I had nothing inside me" (unnumbered 146). Thus, she now associates herself with the darkest parts of the universe, the one most probably unfit for any life form due to its physical parameters. Motherhood would have meant not only a new basis for her self-definition and a new role to inhabit, but also an "identity capital" (James Coté's and Charles Levine's concept), which Wolfgang Kraus explains as "any sort of economic, cultural, social, individual or economic capital allowing for a self-positioning."<sup>19</sup> Since Joy is not about to become a mother after all, being integrated into the system of society through the ability of being a mother is not available for her at this point. Hence, she is still left with the role assigned to her through other-positioning: the unacknowledged mistress who ruined Michael's family.

In addition to emptiness, one can find a variety of further images in the novel illustrating Joy's sensations of weightlessness and nonexistence, such as feeling two-dimensional "like a steamrolled cartoon" (51) instead of a fully-fledged three-dimensional human being. It is, nevertheless, in two-dimensional forms that she often seeks reinforcement of her existence: by taking a photo of herself or looking in the mirror. However, even when Joy encounters her image in some form, she demonstrates a lack of ability to identify with what she sees, incapable of recognising herself. On one occasion, she takes a photo of herself in the mirror and observes afterwards that "[t]he camera bludgeons off half my face and the flash whitens out the rest. My arms are looped over my head to reach the shutter and hold the thing in place. It looks like a spider devouring a light bulb. The only visible eye is shut from the glare. It doesn't look like anybody. It doesn't look like" (156). Joy as the viewer of the photo is twice removed from her actual face as

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<sup>19</sup> Kraus, p. 75.

depicted in a photo taken of an image in the mirror, emphasising the distance between her actual body and her vision of herself. Interestingly, upon encountering this distorted representation of herself, Joy's associations invite images of animals. On the one hand, she claims she looks like a spider; on the other hand, the sentence "[i]t doesn't look like anybody" (156) suggests a missing human quality, presumably related to Joy's shattered sense of self. The representability of her deteriorating self is also problematised by the phrase "look like" (156), since one's photo is normally regarded as *being* oneself instead of having a referent that *looks like* oneself. Eventually, despite the fact that a photo would normally be an evidence of her existence—a more lasting one than the blood on her hands—and it is also visible to others, Joy's strange perception prevents it from fulfilling its representational function.

The sense of alienation depicted here recurs throughout the novel, most conspicuously in the numerous scenes which show Joy watching herself from the outside. Phrases like "I watch myself from the corner of the room" and "[s]elf-conscious. I'm looking over my shoulder, watching the pen in my hand writing monstrous" (7; 189) indicate Joy's split perception of both her body and her mind. Note that in this case self-consciousness has negative implications, as it leads to a sense of displacement: Joy seems to be unable to identify with the self she is conscious of. This sense of alienation is further underlined by a bathing scene at the psychiatric ward: "I watch the smoothness of the plastic taps [...] I watch my hand reach for the soap [...] I have lost the ease of being inside my own skin" (165). As Joy describes what she sees, her gaze passes on to her hand as if it were just another object belonging to her surroundings. Apparently, her body, which should be familiar and essentially hers, is now unfamiliar and somehow separate. Andrew Hock Soon Ng explores the theme of "Joy as gazer and gazed-at" in relation to the objectification of the body and the body's relationship with the objects surrounding it.<sup>20</sup> In his view, Joy's intimate relationship with "everyday things" and her routine motions amidst her surroundings help her "to be grounded in reality."<sup>21</sup> Regarding Joy's home as "an extension of herself," he attributes a new "physical certainty" or "body image" to Joy.<sup>22</sup> However, assigning

20 Andrew Hock Soon Ng, "Coping with Reality: The Solace of Objects and Language in Janice Galloway's *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*," *Critique* 53.3 (2012), 238-250, p. 242.

21 Ng, pp. 240-242.

22 Ng, p. 242.

the same ontological status to Joy's body as to the surrounding objects is rather problematic. Although it seems to provide a link to reality and a basis for self-definition, identification with objects actually moves Joy even further out of her body and away from an actual human consciousness.

This self-threatening process of Joy's alienation from her body culminates when the first-person narrative is broken by the appearance of the third-person pronoun referring to her: "There was *a woman* in the [window] frame [...] *She* was listening to a distant kiddy-ride playing Scotland the Brave. *Her* coat was buttoned up wrong so the collar didn't sit right, the boots scuffed and parting from the sole. The hair needed washed and combed [sic] and *my* eyes were purple. *I* looked like a crazy-woman/wino/raddled old whore" (191, my emphases). Here, initially, Joy does not recognise her image in the shop window, but as her perception changes, so do the pronouns. At the moment of transition there is even some grammatical stumbling to indicate Joy's confusion. It is important to note the collection of nouns in the last sentence, too. After enumerating the signs of slovenliness in the third person, Joy switches to the first person and, upon recognising herself, she turns to much harsher criticism targeted at her mental disorder, her drinking habits, and her love affairs. All three can be seen as stereotypical roles of women cast out of society via other-positioning. At this point, Joy is circumscribed by these roles superimposed on her not only by others but also by herself, as she watches herself from the quasi-outside and internalises the stigmas assigned to her—needless to say, in a rather exaggerated manner, resembling the way stereotypes are used.

Unavoidably, Joy's internalisation of society's attitude has its consequences. According to Nóra Séllei, the recurring images of stains and Joy's compulsive need for cleansing stand for her awareness of being "rejected by the symbolic order" of society and her wish to rid herself of the "filth" associated with her, thereby being involved in Joy's "creation of [...] subjecthood."<sup>23</sup> Using Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, Séllei interprets Joy's anorexia and bulimia as acts of cleansing the body; however, as Séllei points out, regarding herself as "stain" and trying to purify herself result in Joy's "self-erasure," which undermines her project of self-creation.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Joy's feeling of guilt seems to be a pervasive force influencing

23 Nóra Séllei, "Cleanliness and Subjectivity in Janice Galloway's *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*," *Gender Studies* 4.1 (2005), 65–75, pp. 65–66.

24 Séllei, p. 69.

her selfhood, so much so that she looks upon her internalised role as a mistress and thus a rejected member of society as hostile and, therefore, an element that must be eliminated, in line with the attitude of society.

Most of the scenes discussed so far involve the issue of visibility, be it Joy as seen by society, or as seen by herself. Curiously, sight is portrayed by Galloway as the faculty that causes the most harm to Joy: it is through sight that society can force her to follow expectations of bodily appearance and will later stigmatise her, and it is through seeing her changed body and looking at herself from the outside that her sense of alienation from herself is mainly depicted. As we have seen, sight proves to be insufficient in helping Joy with her existential problems, since not even seeing herself in the mirror or in a photograph provides her with the corroboration she needs. There is, however, another sense that receives attention in the novel: touch. When discussing the role of embodiment in subject formation, Elizabeth Grosz emphasises the importance of touch as “a contact sense,” pointing out that “the surface of the toucher and the touched must partially coincide.”<sup>25</sup> Relying on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, Grosz highlights the reversibility of touch, that is “the phenomenon of the being touched of the touching, the crossing over of what is touching to what is touched.”<sup>26</sup> It is probably because of this reversibility and reciprocity of touch that another instance of Joy’s seeking reaffirmation of her existence is sexuality. Thus, Joy looks forward to the visit of her ex-student and now lover David, hoping “[m]aybe I will be embraced, entered, made to exist” (46). Here, even if only momentarily, Joy’s existence is proved through the physical contact between her skin and the skin of the other. When it comes to Joy eventually giving in to her co-worker Tony’s pressure, however, sexual intercourse does not play a similar role. In fact, the opposite happens: although she experiences a “spark of terrible anger,” she “swallow[s] and say[s] nothing,” and ends up observing “I knew he was real. It was me who had no substance, nothing under the skin” (175). Joy’s lack of protesting is not merely an act of giving up agency either willingly or unwillingly, but a matter of power difference. Due to her feeling of weightlessness and emptiness induced both by her missing sense of self and her physical weakness resulting from her eating disorders, Joy is now in an extremely vulnerable state both mentally and bodily,

25 Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 98.

26 Grosz, p. 100.

making her an easy target for Tony. Finally, due to the set of notions promoted by society and internalised by Joy, as well as her ensuing feeling of guilt, Joy blames herself for this incident with Tony, as if it had been a punishment for her affair with Michael: “It’s not Tony’s fault. It must be me” (176).

When the shared experience of sexuality and the pleasure possibly involved fail to help, Joy opts for self-induced pain in order to find proof of her existence: “My knuckles scrape on the brick and the skin peels. I look at the blood and try to believe I’m here” (96-97). At work here is the reversibility that can be found in Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “flesh,” which stands for a “being’s capacity to fold in on itself, a dual orientation inward and outward.”<sup>27</sup> As indicated by the verb *try* in the quotation, the reflexive act of being simultaneously the subject and the object of touching cannot provide the feedback Joy needs. It is important to note, too, that the moment the scar is created, Joy’s act becomes a matter of visibility, since her skin is now marked. Indeed, when Tony takes her out on a date, he notices the scars on her hands and asks her about them. Joy reacts as follows: “I look and see the knuckles bruised and oozy. This is not feminine. A dopey voice says Oops. I tripped. Silly me” (99). As can be seen, Joy interprets Tony’s question as a way of finding a flaw in her femininity and, in response, tries to cover up the un-feminine sign and its highly problematic background with the stereotype of the woman in need of the protection of a practically-minded, strong man.

As demonstrated by some of the scenes quoted above, Joy’s sense of self is heavily influenced by the other identities she has contact with, echoing Ricoeur’s notion that “the life history of each of us is caught up in the histories of others.”<sup>28</sup> Consequently, it is not only Joy who is both a reader and a writer of her own life as presented in the novel, but also other figures. Joy’s surrounding characters thus naturally, but also inevitably, influence her narrative either in a helpful or in a harmful manner. Tony, her sister Myra, the Reverend Dogsboddy, Michael’s wife, and society in general tend to pull her down, whereas Michael, her earlier boyfriend Paul, her friend and colleague Marianne, and Marianne’s mother are figures she is attached to. Yet, these attachments are problematic: Joy relies on these people as some kind of basis for self-definition, and the moment they are removed, her sense of self collapses, as in the case of Michael’s death. The void left behind by Michael is partially and only temporarily filled by friends and

<sup>27</sup> Grosz, p. 100.

<sup>28</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, p. 161.



colleagues who visit her at Marianne's house during the initial stages of her grief and, later on, at the psychiatric ward as well. Importantly, Joy realises the problematic and ambiguous nature of her relationship with other people: "Needing people yet being afraid of them is wearing me out [...] When people visit I am distraught trying to look as if I can cope. At work I never speak but I want to be spoken to. If anyone does I get anxious and stammer. I'm scared of the phone yet I want it to ring" (84). As the novel proceeds, she seems to learn to understand what David meant by saying after Michael's death that "[s]he shouldn't get dependent on any one person again. Not on one person" (132). Thus, when reflecting on her somewhat questionable affair with David, she concludes "[m]aybe now it has to stop. I have to remember not to be dependent on any one person" (133).

By the end of the novel, Joy seems to have arrived at a state which she can take control and begin truly redefining herself. After being confined by rules and expectations and hanging on to routines, she realises the importance of freeing herself from these burdens: "I want to be ready for the surprises. I have to learn to submit to terrifying chaos and not revert" (unnumbered 222-223). As a step towards this necessary chaos, Joy leaves behind the magazine-look, realising "I have to stop reading these fucking magazines" (223), and changes her appearance into one that goes against expectations: "I [...] cut my hair short. Spiky. I colour it purple with permanent dye [...] Tomorrow I will have my ears pierced, twice on one side. It will scare the hell out of David" (unnumbered 232). Here, we see Joy in the process of what Kraus calls "intentional self-positioning," which gives the subject a degree of autonomy via claiming agency and reinforcing the subject's individual viewpoint.<sup>29</sup> By disregarding rules, Joy rejects being positioned according to the expectations of others. Instead, through re-narrating her body and thereby also changing her perception of herself, she can eventually begin to break out from under the spell of other-positioning. As for the space of narrative identity that serves as the setting for this re-positioning, Nóra Séllei points out that *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* illustrates how the concept of "fixed identity" needs to be replaced by a "multiple subjectivity,"<sup>30</sup> since that reductive and "excessively homogeneous" identity is created through self-erasure.<sup>31</sup> Instead of homogeneity, which provides only an illusion of unity and coherence in terms

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29 Kraus, p. 72.

30 Séllei, p. 75.

31 Séllei, p. 69.

of narrative identity, the novel seems to suggest that heterogeneity is needed. In other words, although at first sight the concept of narrative identity might be understood as a coherent and unified identity resembling a well-structured novel, in fact, it is rather more similar to a cacophony of narratives generated by physical sensations and mental perceptions; compiled of memories of the past, episodes of the present, and hopes for the future; and featuring ongoing conflicts between differing versions of one's own story and those imposed by the outside world. Eventually, as opposed to the emptiness and weightlessness of non-existence, the disordered and weighted content of chaos that characterises many aspects of human existence is required for selfhood.

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TEGAN RALEIGH

## Women in Pieces

### Fairy Tales, Gender, and Translation in a Contemporary *Conte* by Assia Djebar

"NARRATIVE EQUALS LIFE; THE ABSENCE OF NARRATIVE, DEATH."

TZVETAN TODOROV<sup>1</sup>

The fairy tale genre lends itself in particular to the process of rewriting, and countless new versions of stories that are centuries old appear every year across the globe. Scholars have provided various reasons to explain why fairy tales are liable to constant revision, modernization, and localization. The structuralist Vladímir Propp argued in the 1920s that there is an essential structure to the Russian folk tale and that the story remains intact even when the characters change, provided that the general narrative trajectory remains consistent.<sup>2</sup> From a psychoanalytic perspective, Bruno Bettelheim averred that the therapeutic and pedagogical value of the fairy tale is due to its unresolved nature; that is, children are responsible for identifying a personally valuable moral that applies to their own specific

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<sup>1</sup> "Le récit égale la vie; l'absence de récit, la mort." Tzvetan Todorov, "Les hommes-récits: les Mille et une nuits," in *Poétique de la prose* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), 33-46, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> See *Morfologija skazki* (1928), first published in English as Vladímir Propp, "Morphology of the Folktale," in *International Journal of American Linguistics* 24.4 (1958), 1-114.

relationship to their families and societies. The appeal of fairy tales, according to Bettelheim, is attributable to their open quality.<sup>3</sup>

This genre's mutable characteristics have led to different variations even across different editions of the same stories, as with Jacob and Wilhelm Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (*Children's and Household Tales*). Their first version of "Snow White" ("Schneewittchen") from 1812 differs considerably from the seventh and final edition of the *KHM* from 1857. In the former instance, the dwarves simply tell Snow White that she will need to earn her keep in order to stay with them, while in the latter, they enumerate the tasks that she will have to perform in order to stay: darn their clothing, prepare their supper, and clean the house. Jack Zipes argues that these changes are related to a more explicit investment by the Brothers Grimm in a patriarchy-centered ideal for the German bourgeoisie that identified men as the breadwinners and women as mistresses of the domestic sphere.<sup>4</sup> Far from objective intermediaries, the Grimms shaped the tales in accordance with their vision for a Germany unified through moralizing narratives.

Collectors, transcribers, and translators have tailored fairy tales, often culled from oral sources, to contemporary tastes and ideologies. Such intervention on their behalf was not always overt, as in the case of Antoine Galland, who introduced *Les Mille et une nuits* (*The Thousand and One Nights*) to a French readership at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. His *Nuits*, published in twelve volumes between 1704 and 1717, consist of free translations from manuscripts as well as "orphan tales"<sup>5</sup> that a Syrian storyteller, Hanna Diab, shared with Galland while passing through Paris in 1709. To make his work pleasing to his readers, Galland added, trimmed, and padded his source material. This created the illusion of an integral whole that situated itself easily alongside the fairy tales that were immensely popular at that time. In Galland's version, there are no traces of messy manuscripts

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3 "The fairy tale, in contrast [to the fable], leaves all decisions up to us, including whether we wish to make any at all. It is up to us whether we wish to make any application to our life from a fairy tale, or simply enjoy the fantastic events it tells about. Our enjoyment is what induces us to respond in our own good time to the hidden meanings, as they may relate to our life experience and present state of personal development." Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Random House, 2010), p. 43.

4 Jack Zipes, *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World* (New York: Routledge, 1988). See especially pp. 25-64.

5 Michael Cooperson, "The Monstrous Births of Aladdin," in *The Arabian Nights Reader*, ed. Ulrich Marzolph (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 265-282, p. 267.

or lacunae. As such, Galland was just as much a creator and author of his *Nuits* as he was their translator. Scholars such as Jean-Paul Sermain as well as Georges May have praised Galland for fashioning a unique work of art, while others such as Muhsin Mahdi have reproached him for misleading readers and claimed that rather than improving upon the material, he actually degraded it.<sup>6</sup>

In the tale of Ali Baba, which is one of the aforementioned orphan tales for which no original manuscripts are available, the eponymous hero catches sight of forty thieves entering a cave with the password *open sesame*. His brother Cassim, wanting to partake of the riches himself, ventures to the cave on his own. Though he remembers the formula that grants him entrance to the cave, he forgets the words that will let him out. The thieves find him there and kill him, cutting his body into four parts. Ali Baba recovers his brother's dismembered corpse and has it sewn together for a proper burial so the thieves will not discover the connection between him and his brother. This episode evokes two central themes that I will be discussing in this paper: first, the link between voice and survival, and secondly, the process of assembling in the narrative act. Here, the focus will be on the disorienting shift in authority in a postcolonial context. Who speaks? Who assembles or disassembles?

Cassim's inability to find the right words is a fatal failure. The importance of eloquence is especially pronounced for female characters in the *Nuits*, with Scheherazade serving as a prime example. She volunteers to marry the Sultan Sharyar, who, having found himself cuckolded, vowed to take a new wife every night and have her beheaded the next morning. By captivating the sultan with her stories, which she frequently leaves unfinished at the break of dawn, Scheherazade convinces the sultan to postpone her death so he can hear the rest the following night. In most versions, this frame narrative of Scheherazade and Sharyar concludes with a reformed Sharyar calling off his revenge, taking Scheherazade as his sultana, and ordering his scribes to write down all of the tales – including

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6 For Mahdi's scathing critique of Galland, see Muhsin Mahdi, "The Sources of Galland's *Nuits*," in *The Arabian Nights Reader*, ed. Ulrich Marzolph (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 122-137. He himself is not without his critics; see Madeleine Dobie, "Translation in the Contact Zone: Antoine Galland's *Mille et une nuits: contes arabes*," in *The Arabian Nights in Historical Context: Between East and West*, eds Saree Makdisi and Felicity Nussbaum (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 25-50.



his own – for posterity. Scheherazade, unlike Cassim, escapes death thanks to the power of her words.

Scheherazade retells stories in a way that keeps her audience in thrall. With the seemingly endless tales and tales-within-tales, the only definitive *dénouement* in the Galland version is when Sharyar decides to take her as his wife. Sermain has demonstrated that the choices Galland made when translating from manuscripts full of holes and inconsistencies created an overall illusion of unity.<sup>7</sup> He compares Galland's task as a translator to Ali Baba's process of bringing together the fragments of his brother's body in order to create a whole assembled by artifice. Elsewhere, Georges May has also evoked this play of illusion when referring to Galland's creation as a *chef-d'œuvre invisible*.<sup>8</sup>

Three centuries after Galland, Scheherazade's legacy continues to flourish, but the dynamics of transmission and the intervention of narrators have become more pronounced. In the work of Algerian-born author Assia Djebar, Scheherazade appears as a paragon of female power whose intelligence entitles her to exert just as much influence as established male rulers. Djebar's "La Femme en Morceaux" ("The Woman in Pieces")<sup>9</sup> revisits the tale "Histoire de la Dame massacrée et du jeune homme son mari" ("The Story of the Massacred Woman and the Young Man, Her Husband") from the *Nuits*. Unlike Galland, Djebar's writing does not attempt to form a seamless whole, but rather reveals the interstices – that is, the silences imposed by colonialism, followed by religious fanaticism, in her native Algeria. In Djebar's story, Scheherazade remains subject to the threat of censorship, and her voice is not necessarily enough to save her life.

In "The Woman in Pieces," Scheherazade appears as a feminist figure who is entirely capable not only of enchanting but of replacing men. However, her triumph is uncertain, in contrast with her fate in the *Nuits* of Galland. She is embodied by the character of Atyka, who teaches French in Algeria during the 1990s. During this period, Francophone writers, intellectuals, and singers became

7 Jean-Paul Sermain, *Les Mille et une nuits entre Orient et Occident* (Paris: Desjonquères, 2009), pp. 23–30.

8 See Georges May, *Les Mille et une nuits d'Antoine Galland ou le chef-d'œuvre invisible* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1986).

9 This story appears in the collection Assia Djebar, *Oran, langue morte* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1997), which was published in English as Assia Djebar, *The Tongue's Blood Does Not Run Dry: Algerian Stories*, trans. Tegan Raleigh (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2006). Translations here are my own, T. R., with occasional changes to the 2006 version; this includes the title, which translates more literally as *Stilled Life, Oran*.

targets for Islamic extremists who considered the French language to be a legacy of colonization that needed to be eliminated. Because of this threat, writers such as Djebbar frequently had to live in exile or labor under heavy censorship, and these are the circumstances that inform both the outcome of the tale and its *raison d'être*.

#### REINSCRIBING TRANSMISSION AND TRANSLATION:

##### *A CHEF-D'ŒUVRE VISIBILE*

Djebbar was born in 1936 in the Algerian city of Cherchell, which is situated between Oran and the nation's capital, Algiers. Napoleon III had taken Algiers just over a century before, in 1830, and French had been a dominant language in the region ever since. Initially, France's colonial philosophy was based on the principle of assimilation, meaning that schools taught French and French values. The French colonials had taken over the economy, seizing land from locals to give to Europeans, who primarily cultivated grapes for wine. The local Berber and Arab populations were devastated. Not surprisingly, it soon became apparent that the French language was a means of accessing power, and those who learned it became part of a class that enjoyed some privilege.

The French language arrived with the Third Republic's army and was the voice of the institutions that had displaced the Arab deys. Throughout Francophone literature from North Africa as well as immigrant fiction from France, the French language appears as a character unto itself, frequently associated with oppression but subsequently with freedom, particularly for women. Scenes from *Stilled Life, Oran (Oran, langue morte)* starkly illustrate the affiliation of a cold, supercilious regime with what Djebbar has referred to as "la langue du père" ("the language of the father"), or French.<sup>10</sup> During the colonial period and the era just after the Independence of 1962, the association that the French language evoked in many Algerians was war and tyranny. Yet school was conducted primarily in French for many Algerians in the pre-liberation period, and Djebbar belongs to a generation of Algerian-born writers who first studied literature in French, rather than Arabic or Tamazight. In the speech she gave upon receiving the Prix de la Paix in 2000, Djebbar explained that she associated her affective life with Arabic

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10 Assia Djebbar, *Vaste est la prison* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995), p. 11.

and French with her intellectual life.<sup>11</sup> She attributed to the fact that her father had been a French teacher her ability to pursue the kind of education that was often not available for young girls and that French became for her a kind of vehicle allowing her significant geographic and social mobility.

Djebar's reasons for writing in French differ from those that motivate Atyka, the teacher in "The Woman in Pieces," to opt for a career in French literature. Atyka surprises her parents when she tells them about her choice of vocation. Her father intimates that pursuing Arabic would be nobler or more lucrative, but her mother replies, "[i]t's obvious that she hears us laugh or argue in what? In French! It's us two that she loves in this language!"<sup>12</sup> Atyka continues, "French will let me come and go, not just in multiple languages – but in all ways!"<sup>13</sup>

Atyka chooses French because it is the language in which she has grown up feeling at home. Djebar, on the other hand, developed this sense of home rather than being born into it. In "Écrire dans la langue de l'autre" ("Writing in the Language of the Other"), she explains that, after "trying, entangled in this silk veil symbolically evoked, to pull away from the French language without altogether leaving it," she re-entered it "like a landlady, not as an occupant with hereditary rights. Thus, French was truly becoming for me a welcoming home, maybe even a permanent place [...] Finally I crossed the threshold freely, no longer submitting to a colonized situation."<sup>14</sup>

Because Djebar's writing has multiple linguistic strata, some readers believe that Djebar writes in a French that is not *French* French. In *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature*, Miriam Cooke suggests that Djebar's mother tongue is a composite of multiple languages: "Even if she is writing in French, she is not writing in the language of the other because she is recreating in this French a life lived by her foremothers in Berber and Arabic. She has

11 Assia Djebar, "Idiome de l'exil et langue de l'irréductibilité," in *Assia Djebar*, ed. Ernstpeter Ruhe (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2001), 9-18.

12 "Tu vois bien qu'elle nous entend à la maison rire ou nous quereller en quoi... en français! C'est nous deux qu'elle aime dans cette langue!" Djebar, *Oran*, p. 168. Unless otherwise indicated, all italics are in the original.

13 "Le français me servira pour aller et venir, dans tous les espaces, autant que dans plusieurs langues!" Djebar, *Oran*, p. 168.

14 Assia Djebar, "Writing in the Language of the Other," trans. Isabelle de Courtivron and Susan Slyomovics, in *Lives in Translation: Bilingual Writers on Identity and Creativity*, ed. Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 19-28, p. 21.

'translated' French into her mother tongue, a writing-trace that becomes the basis of a new imagined community of women."<sup>15</sup> Her process of translation thus proceeds in a different direction than Galland's; while the latter was more inclined to efface that which the French language and the French readership would not accept or understand, Djebbar experiments with language and literary forms and makes this French translation a point of contact and dialogue.

Another scholar who echoes this concept of the writing-trace is Nicholas Harrison, who notes that the French "in which Djebbar writes bears the trace of the other languages with which she is familiar, Arabic and Berber; and the literary forms which she works in are influenced by and in some ways seek to capture and convey elements of that non-literate, non-literary tradition."<sup>16</sup> Historically, oral storytelling in Algeria has been a great source of power for women both in the Arabic and Tamazight languages. As Marnia Lazreg writes:

The oral tradition established by women through the manipulation of speech is exceptionally rich. Throughout the colonial era and before the advent of television, storytelling was the quasimonopoly of women [...] In fact there was a division of labor of sorts that characterized storytelling. Men, mostly fathers, often told stories not only to their children, but also to their wives, derived from the *One Thousand and One Nights*, or from early Islamic history.<sup>17</sup>

Interestingly, it is the *Alf Layla wa Layla*, or the *Nuits*, with its heroine Scheherazade, who saves her own life as well as those of thousands of women through her narrative finesse, that the men would relate to their wives. Djebbar translates Scheherazade's position of authority into reality by becoming the storyteller herself and replacing the male gaze with a female one.

Throughout her career as an author, Djebbar actively engaged oral and written narratives instead of treating them as entirely separate. This is a maneuver that

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15 Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 50.

16 Nicholas Harrison, *Postcolonial Criticism: History, Theory, and the Work of Fiction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 121.

17 Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 108.

merges the power of traditional women's oral narratives with the greater permanency of the written text. For while it may be true that a substantial number of Algerian women are literate, they do not necessarily have the social leverage to speak out. It is not only television that threatens to silence them, as suggested above by Lazreg, but also the government's championing of a homogeneous language, Modern Standard Arabic, or *al-lughah al-'Arabīyah al-fuṣṣḥá*, as differentiated from local dialects such as *derija*.

In the 1990s, the language in which an Algerian chose to speak, teach, or read, however innocently one's decision was made, was charged with political significance. Language, like the veil, became a politically charged signifier. In the introduction to "The White of Algeria," Clarisse Zimra describes how secularist extremists attacked women wearing veils and fundamentalist Islamists attacked women not wearing veils.<sup>18</sup> Whether neutral or politically affiliated, people could not carry on with their daily lives without running the risk of inadvertently making a political statement. Like the veil, language indicated political allegiance. As a result, writers and thinkers who had been schooled in French and who employed it as their primary language became identified as enemies of the Islamic state, even if their use of the French language had no political ties.

With the censorship and the campaign against two of Algeria's most widely-spoken languages, the Algerian civil war (1990-1998) remained severely undocumented. The title of Djébar's *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* (published originally in 1995 and in English translation by David Kelley as *Algerian White* in 2002) refers to this process of effacement, to the lives and memories that slipped into oblivion during Algeria's civil war as well as its war for independence (1954-1962), the latter of which the French referred to euphemistically as "the events" ("les événements"). The Hexagone's reluctance to call a conflict that claimed more than a million lives by its true name – war – parallels its denial of the killing of the 40-400 demonstrators at a "Peace in Algeria" rally in Paris on October 17, 1961. In the short story "Oran, langue morte" ("Stilled Life, Oran"), the narrator, in explaining to her friend why she wants to visit Algeria for her summer vacation, implies that she would like to go there as a witness because its stories are not being recorded: "In Oran, you forget. Forget and forget more. A city that has

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18 Clarisse Zimra, "Introduction" to Assia Djébar's "The White of Algeria," trans. Andrew Benson, *Yale French Studies* No. 87 (1995), 138-141.

been washed; a memory bleached.”<sup>19</sup> The edging out of oral traditions and the dominance of a linguistically homogeneous, heavily censored discourse meant that only the voice in power was dictating the terms of history.

Algerian experiences were being extremely marginalized, as had happened in the periods of colonization and the war for independence. Anne Donadey writes, “[w]ithout their own records, Algerians are erased from a history written from the enemy’s perspective.”<sup>20</sup> Women’s experiences in particular were absent from these narratives, as their sphere was almost exclusively domestic at the time of colonization and was invisible to most of the soldiers who were writing these histories. As a result, highly imaginative visions of the interior developed in the absence of actual contact with it. In *Stilled Life, Oran*, Djebbar writes against linguistic homogenization, transcribing the experiences of those who otherwise may have left no trace. The title indicates both a lament for a language that is no longer of the living and the renewal of language; *langue morte* translates literally as *dead language* but is also a play on the French term for *still life* (*nature morte*) and suggests survival through revisiting, rewriting, and recombination. Djebbar becomes Ali Baba sewing up his brother’s corpse and she becomes Galland cobbling together stories to create a work of translation, though in her work the interstices remain visible and raw.

#### FRAGMENTED NARRATIVE-BODIES IN ASSIA DJEBBAR

The table of contents for *Stilled Life, Oran* lists “The Woman in Pieces” as a *conte* (tale), as distinct from the other texts which appear in the same volume, which are *nouvelles* (short stories). The term *conte*, etymologically related to the word *raconter*, or *to tell*, points to the particular influence of oral traditions while simultaneously situating the story in a context separate from that of the *nouvelles*, which she addresses in the afterword as having a relationship to news items. *Stilled Life, Oran* is comprised of fictionalized accounts of real events that transpired in France and Algeria in the 1990s. Djebbar told me, and has also written in different essays, that the origins of all of these stories were in accounts that people told her. While

19 “A Oran, on oublie. Oubli sur oubli. Ville lessivée; mémoire blanchie.” Djebbar, *Oran*, p. 13.

20 Anne Donadey, “Rekindling the Vividness of the Past: Assia Djebbar’s Films and Fiction,” *World Literature Today* Vol. 70 (1996), 885-892, p. 886.

Algeria witnessed some of its most chaotic and bleak years, Djébar was no longer in her home country and experienced the events at a distance. With severe censorship in Algeria itself and scant coverage in the Western press, Djébar relied upon such oral accounts in order to assemble a narrative for what was taking place in her home country, though the narratives themselves tell of this very struggle to locate coherence among disparate fragments.

Relating the assassination of a French teacher – based on a real-life event – as a *conte* emphasizes the unreal nature of the crime. Who, in actual life, would murder a high school teacher? The story in the *Nuits* upon which it is based has a slightly different title than Djébar's; it is the 91<sup>st</sup> night in Galland's version, called "Histoire de la Dame massacrée et du jeune homme son mari," or "The Story of the Massacred Woman and the Young Man, her Husband." Djébar's text begins with a description of the woman in pieces for whom the tale is named: at the bottom of the Tigris River in Baghdad rests the body of a butchered woman. The first paragraphs enumerate the different layers of funereal materials surrounding her corpse: a shroud, a coffin, a chest. This chanting of details is a refrain in the text, interrupting the flow of the narrative. It appears a second time in the opening pages and again at the very end. In the second instance, the caliph Haroun al-Rashid and his vizier are unpacking the chest which a fisherman has pulled in with his nets, and the reader can see the different layers that they go through as they get closer to the butchered woman's body.

This act of unpacking mirrors the layering that will occur on the narrative level, for the initial paragraphs of "The Woman in Pieces" are actually the outermost ring of a story that has several layers. The description of the woman in pieces is, we soon learn, being told by Atyka to her class during a unit that she is doing on the *Mille et une nuits* and its variations. This functions as a *mise-en-abyme*, as Djébar's *conte* is a reworking of the Galland version, and comparable variations are the subject of her class. Such rewritings have been extremely different, reflecting the cultural milieus and individual prejudices and predilections of the translators. Sir Richard Burton's translation into English is one of the most extreme cases, containing misogynistic and anti-Semitic details that are absent from the versions by Galland. Significantly, the tale of "La Dame massacrée" from the *Nuits*, as told by Atyka, does not correspond with any of the translations that the class is studying, and is colored by Atyka's fears and perceptions as a French teacher in the volatile climate of Algeria during the 1990s.

Atyka's version embellishes and deepens the story, telling it with a greater appreciation for the point of view of the woman who ultimately ends up in pieces. As she wanders through her neighborhood musing about her class, Atyka imagines that the reason the woman develops a longing for apples – the apples of discord that lead to a fatal misunderstanding with her husband – is that she is oppressed by her roles as a wife and a mother. As she walks, Atyka retells the story, aligning herself both with the European translators and authors who reconfigured the tales of the *Nuits*, as well as Scheherazade herself. The link between storytelling and survival becomes foregrounded as Atyka embellishes the character of “La Dame massacrée” and invents a new narrative for her: weary with the burden of labor and child-rearing, the main character is isolated and has nobody in whom to confide. It is thus her confinement and the inability to share her own tales that are destroying her, compounded by the duties that the roles of wife and mother have made incumbent upon her.

Such a perspective which empathizes with women whose roles are limited to being domestic fixtures is not present in Galland's version of this tale. The woman in pieces is already fragmented before her husband murders and mutilates her; her unease about her wifely role is exacerbated by her inability to talk about it, like Atyka and Djebbar herself, whose voices were threatened by the French linguisticide of the 1990s in Algeria. When storytelling is a matter of life and death, the inability to narrate one's own tale can be fatal. The disparity among the different French versions of the tale is a subject Atyka would like to discuss with her class, but she is killed before she has the opportunity to do so.

*“Aren't you going to tell us, Madame, about the different French translations, the ones after Galland's? It seems that it was very sugar-coated. We could even say it censored the original text.” Atyka looks at her watch: fifteen minutes to respond to this very pertinent question. But will she have enough time to finish up with the serial tomorrow? The serial invented by the vizier Djaffar, with all of its variations?*<sup>21</sup>

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21 “- Nous parlerez-vous, madame, ensuite, des différentes traductions françaises, après celle de Galland? Celui-ci, paraît-il, aurait beaucoup édulcoré, disons même censuré le texte original... Atyka regarda sa montre: un quart d'heure pour répondre à cette question si pertinente mais le lendemain, aurait-elle assez de temps pour résumer le feuilleton, avec toutes ses variations, inventé par le vizir Djaffar?” Djebbar, Oran, p. 206.



The irony is that the class has been studying Galland's *Nuits*, one of the most conservative versions of the *Nights*, whose translator Jorge Luis Borges has reproached for his "scandalous decorum."<sup>22</sup> Before Atyka can begin to describe translations other than Galland's, a group of assassins barges into the classroom. The armed men tell her that she is teaching indecent material, then shoot her in the chest. The leader cuts off her head and sets it on her desk, so that it faces the classroom of horrified children, who are hiding under their tables, whimpering.

Although Atyka is murdered, she is not quieted before she passes on her version of "The Woman in Pieces" to her pupils. Her youngest student, Omar, keeps hearing her voice long after her death. As he wanders through the city of Algiers, Omar wonders about the woman's body, which can never be pieced back together, not even in the imaginary world of the conte. Yet bullets have not managed to silence her, for her voice has lodged itself into the memories of those who retain it and transmit it to others in their turn.

Atyka is not so fortunate as the Scheherazade of Galland's *Nuits*. In the latter instance, Scheherazade saves herself and other women from decapitation by charming the sultan with her tales. As Atyka's class discusses the *Nuits*, they note that when Scheherazade narrates the story that the vizier Djaffar tells the caliph Haroun al-Rachid in the hopes that the latter will spare his life, the vizier becomes Scheherazade's double. This serves to demonstrate that Scheherazade is gifted enough to supplant the vizier, a position traditionally reserved for men, and one student even comments that the *Nuits* are feminist.

Atyka is teaching the *Nights* in French, rather than Arabic, which already introduces one stage of translation, or rewriting; and Atyka is also rewriting them as she imagines herself as the protagonist, the woman whose life as a sequestered breeder has rendered her ill. The character from the *Nuits* is butchered by her jealous husband, and Atyka by Islamic extremists. The only promise for brighter possibilities is to create a new kind of language, not a maternal or paternal one of origins, but one of the future: a hybridized tongue comprised of multiple languages and of multiple voices, what Djebbar called "the language of the daughter"<sup>23</sup> in the short story "Annie and Fatima," also from the same collection

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22 Jorge Luis Borges, "The Translators of the Book of One Thousand and One Nights," in *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger, trans. Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine, and Eliot Weinberger (New York: Viking, 1999), 92-109, p. 96.

23 Djebbar, *Oran*, p. 228.

of stories. Here, a French woman starts language classes in Berber so that she can speak with her daughter, whom the father has taken to Algeria. A friend sees this mother's motivation to speak on Algeria's terms, signifying a reversal of previous linguistic dynamics, as forward-thinking:

"You see, when she told me that she was learning Berber so that she would be able to communicate with her daughter one day, I was shocked, even disturbed, by this: we always talk about a 'mother tongue' that we lose and then reacquire (and in my case, it's that... Berber... to speak it finally like my grandmother, because my mother cut herself off from it!), but, you see, Annie is seeking out 'the language of the daughter'! A language no longer of origins, but of her future; and ever since everything in her is back in movement!"<sup>24</sup>

The focus is no longer on the past, but rather on conciliation and communication, and this rapprochement is instigated by maternal love. A quest for origins reveals itself to be less promising than a desire for multiple beginnings and languages; this same orientation plays out in Djébar's reassembly of the "Woman in Pieces" tale with elements from the experiences of Algerian women.

Djébar's text demonstrates that there is still rewriting to be done, new gender narratives are needed, and that while we may not always be as fortunate as Galland's Scheherazade to save our own lives through storytelling, there is always that hope. In "Les hommes-récits," a short essay on the *Nuits*, Tristan Todorov wrote that each character was a "man-tale" who survived thanks to his own life story;<sup>25</sup> here, in Djébar's work, *femmes-récits* have a place, as fragmented as they may be.

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24 "Vois-tu, quand elle m'a dit qu'elle apprenait le berbère pour pouvoir un jour communiquer avec sa fille, j'ai été frappée, bouleversée même par cette évidence: on parle toujours, quant à nous, de la 'langue maternelle' perdue et à réacquérir (Et dans mon cas, c'est cela, le berbère, le parler enfin comme ma grand-mère, puisque ma mère s'en est coupée!), mais Annie, vois-tu, elle va, elle à la rencontre de la 'langue de la fille'! Une langue non plus de l'origine mais de son avenir et tout désormais s'est remis, en elle, à bouger!" Djébar, *Oran*, p. 228.

25 Todorov, p. 41.

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EMMA BÁINT

# Who's Afraid of Red Riding Hood?

## Little Red Riding Hood as *a Fille Fatale* in *Hard Candy*

### INTRODUCTION

The story, categorized under the Aarne-Thompson-Uther tale type 333 (ATU 333),<sup>1</sup> goes like this: Girl meets Wolf in the dark and mysterious forest; Wolf tricks Girl into telling him where she is going; Wolf runs ahead, eats Grandma, puts on her clothes, and waits for Girl in Grandma's bed. After this point, the various versions differ considerably. In the oldest known oral versions of the tale, the heroine usually tricks the Wolf and saves herself before he has the chance to do her harm.<sup>2</sup> In Charles Perrault's literary adaptation (1697), in contrast, instead of using her wits, she lies in bed with the Wolf and ends up being eaten by him, never to be rescued. What is more, Gustave Doré's accompanying illustrations and Perrault's concluding moral about "attractive, well bred young ladies" and wolves "who pursue young women" make the meeting between the Girl and the Wolf appear sexual, while also showing that it is primarily her who is held responsible for not knowing better and allowing herself to be seduced and fatally

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1 Alan Dundes, ed., *Little Red Riding Hood: A Casebook* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. ix.

2 Dundes, p. 3.

violated by the Wolf.<sup>3</sup> In yet another classic version, the Grimm Brothers' "Little Red Cap" (1812), even though a noble huntsman ensures a happy ending by rescuing both women, the Girl is still blamed for her temporary fall.<sup>4</sup> It seems that in this third case, the single decision to defy the warning by her mother transforms the protagonist known as either clever or naïve in previous versions of the tale into a deliberately disobedient and errant child. Although the Wolf is punished in the end in some versions, the fact that in each case the victim is held at least as responsible as the perpetrator for their often sexualized encounter and its outcome makes the development of this tale evocative of contemporary rape culture. Recent adaptations of the tale, however, particularly film adaptations created for young adult or adult audiences, often attempt to reverse this inclination towards victim blaming.

Partly as a result of the malleability of its ending, "Little Red Riding Hood" has become one of the most popular and most commonly and variedly adapted classic fairy tales.<sup>5</sup> Within the area of film adaptations in particular, Jack Zipes calls attention to those made after the publication of Angela Carter's short story "The Company of Wolves" (1979) and its filmic adaptation of the same title (dir. Neil Jordan, Incorporated Television Company, 1984), for they tend to present more forceful young women who are "intent on following [their] desires and breaking with the male gaze of domination,"<sup>6</sup> turning the tale into a narrative of female empowerment and revenge. For this end, many adaptations use older, lesser-known versions of the tale as their sources in order to present a self-reliant heroine, as in the short film *Little Red Riding Hood* (dir. David Kaplan, Little Red Movie Productions, 1997), while it is also common to relocate the narrative into a contemporary setting to make it more relevant to various audiences, as in *Freeway* (dir. Matthew Bright, The Kushner-Locke Company, 1996), or to mix the

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3 Charles Perrault, "Little Red Riding Hood," in *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, ed. Jack Zipes (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvin Publishers, 1983), 69-72.

4 Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, "Little Red Cap," in *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, ed. Jack Zipes (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvin Publishers, 1983), 123-126.

5 Sandra L. Beckett, *Red Riding Hood for All Ages: A Fairy-Tale Icon in Cross-Cultural Contexts* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), p. 6.

6 Jack Zipes, "The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood Revisited and Reviewed," in *The Enchanted Screen: The Unknown History of Fairy-Tale Films* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 134-157, p. 135.

fairy tale genre with others, primarily with horror, as in one of the tale's most recent adaptations, *Red Riding Hood* (dir. Catherine Hardwicke, Warner Bros., 2011).

In the following, I will discuss *Hard Candy* (dir. David Slade, Vulcan Productions, 2005), a film which only subtly alludes to elements of "Little Red Riding Hood" but utilizes the abovementioned techniques of revisionist fairy tale adaptations to examine the very relevant yet taboo subject of pedophilia. This film, set in contemporary America, presents a main character who defends herself like the protagonists in oral versions of the tale, and is narrated in the form of a nerve-racking psychological thriller, bearing visual and structural elements of the 1940s *film noir* and 1970s rape-revenge traditions as well. In *Hard Candy*, a "[n]either noisy, nor hateful, nor angry, / But tame, obliging and gentle"<sup>7</sup> Wolf, 32-year-old Jeff Kohler (Patrick Wilson), tries to lure the seemingly naïve Hayley Stark (Ellen Page)—who claims to be only 14 years old—from the virtual space of a chat room into his very real den. After "lensman319" and "thonggrrrl14"<sup>8</sup> meet for the first time in a coffee shop, where the camera forebodingly lingers on the poster of a missing girl, Hayley soon begins to take control by getting herself invited to his home, teasing him by dancing in her underwear, and finally spiking his drink with drugs and tying him to a chair, with the aim of taking revenge for the rape and murder of the abovementioned missing girl, culminating in her assisting him to commit suicide at the end of film.

Hayley's initial trick that sets off the thrilling narrative is only the first of many twists and turns in the roles of prey and predator, which shift the spectators' sympathies so many times that it becomes difficult to tell who is a hero and who is a villain. Due to such intense dynamism between the two, it is necessary to define the characters in opposition to one another first; and it is only after the observation of the contrast between the two that it becomes evident that the most accurate way to describe Hayley's personality, which is conflicting in itself, is as an adolescent *femme fatale*-in-training, in other words, a *fille fatale*. Hayley, instead of simply following the Perraultian primer, takes matters into her hands and, through an array of deceiving roles and a series of actions of questionable morality, avenges the Wolf. Since the only existing definition of the *fille fatale*, available on the website *TV Tropes*,<sup>9</sup> is quite constrained and set

7 Perrault, p. 6.

8 *Hard Candy*, dir. David Slade (Vulcan Productions, 2005).

9 "Fille Fatale," *TV Tropes*, accessed 2 December 2014.



in a misogynistic context, I wish to contest it with the help of the close analysis of Hayley's character within the greater context of the film *Hard Candy* in order to provide a more suitable definition.

### *HARD CANDY* (2006)

*Hard Candy* is a very unique "Little Red Riding Hood" adaptation, primarily because it does not claim to be one at all. It is a so-called "unconscious adaptation" in which, according to the filmmakers, all resemblance to the tale is coincidental.<sup>10</sup> David W. Higgins, the producer, asserted that any existing similarities to the fairy tale appeared as "accidental poetry,"<sup>11</sup> which implies that although unintentional, they are nevertheless present, and they even add an additional layer of meaning to the film. Brian Nelson, the scriptwriter, clarified that he was inspired by actual Japanese girls, neglected and helpless like the heroines of most "Little Red Riding Hood" tales and that of the film *Hard Candy* in particular, who decided to take action by seducing older men and attacking the molesters when they tried to take advantage of them.<sup>12</sup> While Nelson's statement distances the film from the tale, it also makes the story more relevant to contemporary audiences by dealing with a current issue, which is a particularly important aspect of recent fairy tale adaptations for adults.

Another way in which *Hard Candy* follows contemporary versions of "Little Red Riding Hood" is that instead of the traditional topics of "stranger danger" or child abuse, it focuses on the issue of pedophilia specifically,<sup>13</sup> making the sexual aspects of the story explicit, which have usually only been referred to covertly in earlier oral and literary versions. Although it does not detach itself from the strictly patriarchal and heterosexual realm of traditional fairy tales as modern adaptations tend to do, *Hard Candy* does present non-normative sexual identities, such as Jeff as a pedophile or Hayley as a homosexual, a reference to which can be

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<sup>10</sup> Natalie Hayton, "Unconscious Adaptation: *Hard Candy* as *Little Red Riding Hood*," *Adaptation* 4.1 (2001), 38-54, p. 40.

<sup>11</sup> "Creating *Hard Candy*," in *Hard Candy DVD Extras*, dir. David Slade (Vulcan Productions, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> "Creating *Hard Candy*."

<sup>13</sup> Beckett, p. 34.

found in an early version of the shooting script.<sup>14</sup> The film presents quite a unique case when a young woman masquerading as a child and as an innocent Little Red Riding Hood, seeing that the state cannot protect her and other young girls like her, takes matters into her own hands, proving that the tale type ATU 333 is ideal for being turned into not only a revenge but a rape-revenge film.<sup>15</sup> Little Red, who is usually the prey, becomes the assailant, and the usual female victim of rape<sup>16</sup> and of horror films in general<sup>17</sup> is replaced with a not-quite-innocent male Wolf. Understanding the film in the context of film noirs and rape-revenge films is especially rewarding since none of the main characters of either genre can ever be considered completely innocent or guilty, as is the case in *Hard Candy* as well.

While it is true that the filmmakers avoided using music in the majority of the scenes in order not to manipulate the experiences and sympathies of the spectators, portraiture and point-of-view are designed to prevent them from identifying or sympathizing with either character for a longer period of time, creating the film's distinctively tense atmosphere and establishing Hayley's character as an ambiguous *fille fatale*. Certain cinematographic techniques, such as the varied use of camera movement, focus, and lighting, help convey the moods of the characters and of the whole scene, which not only express the psychological states of the characters, but also attempt to influence, toy with, and even mislead the viewers by urging them to question the righteousness of Hayley's revenge and to perceive her as "the figure of a certain discursive unease,"<sup>18</sup> a typically ambiguous, albeit young, *femme fatale*. This kind of intervention refutes the filmmakers' claim that they tried to present their story in as objective a manner as possible.<sup>19</sup> While in the earliest frames of the film, more focus is on Hayley to emphasize her innocence, in later ones, close-ups are used strategically in moments of vulnerability or pressure. In the castration scene, for instance, the camera takes a long close-up shot of Jeff's face, at once creating empathy in the viewers and allowing them

<sup>14</sup> Brian Nelson, "Hard Candy Shooting Draft" (2003), *Horror Lair*, accessed 14 January 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 124.

<sup>16</sup> Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975), p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44.4 (1991), 2-13, p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> "Creating *Hard Candy*."

to scrutinize his face to decide whether he is lying in his denial of pedophilia or not.<sup>20</sup> What is more, the quality of the shot changes every time something important happens, and the colors, not only of the setting but of lighting as well, insinuate feelings. For example, cold and misty blue lighting along with darker colors and shadows reflect Hayley's rage and hunger for revenge when Jeff wakes up tied to a chair in his living room, while the shaky and handheld shots in the final scenes of the film overwrite previous ethical discussions between Hayley and Jeff, and focus on violence and tension alone.

These visual tricks are used to enhance an otherwise dialogue-dominated film confined mostly in a single space, and help shift the focus to the two main characters' development and discourse. *Hard Candy* blurs the line between good and evil, and questions the ethicalness and rightfulness of the vigilante character's actions, demonstrating the way revisionist fairy tale films present their characters "in shades of grey" as opposed to the black-and-white, good-or-evil representations in classic fairy tales.<sup>21</sup> As the roles "dramatically flip-flop,"<sup>22</sup> the lines between victim and psychopath become ambivalent, and so Hayley becomes "Red/wolf (as victim/aggressor)," and Jeff just the opposite, "wolf/Red (as aggressor/victim)."<sup>23</sup> Hayley, however, no matter how many dimensions each character gets, continues to see people as either good or bad, much like children do according to Bruno Bettelheim,<sup>24</sup> even if it is not as evident for the spectator whether she is the protagonist or the antagonist of the narrative.

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20 Claire Henry, "The Postfeminist Trap of *Vagina Dentata* for the American Teen Castatrice," in *Revisionist Rape-Revenge: Redefining a Film Genre* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 57-79, p. 71.

21 Pauline Greenhill and Sidney Eve Matrix, eds, *Fairy Tale Films: Visions of Ambiguity* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2010), p. 9.

22 Catherine Orenstein, *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked: Sex, Morality, and the Evolution of a Fairy Tale* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), p. 5.

23 Pauline Greenhill and Steven Kohm, "Little Red Riding Hood and the Pedophile in Film: *Freeway*, *Hard Candy*, and *The Woodsman*," *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* 1.2 (Winter 2009), 35-65, p. 57, *Project MUSE*, accessed 25 November 2014.

24 Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), pp. 8-9.

## WOLF'S STORY

In order to understand the role and disposition of the character of the Wolf, one should first examine the villains of older versions of the tale and the prejudice surrounding the animal itself. In seventeenth-century France, the antagonist of the folktale "Little Red Riding Hood" was known as "a bzou,"<sup>25</sup> which can refer to a number of different kinds of demons, including werewolves. Since then, this supernatural enemy has been replaced by a regular wolf, which, incidentally, has almost as many negative connotations as the werewolf itself. In a general sense, the image of a wolf "represents all the asocial, animalistic tendencies within ourselves,"<sup>26</sup> while, more specifically, it may also refer to "a seducer of women or a lady killer."<sup>27</sup> These definitions support both Perrault's didactic moral and the shift towards using the tale as a warning against sexual predators and pedophiles in its more recent adaptations.

On the outside, Jeff, the Wolf of *Hard Candy*, seems to be a handsome and sophisticated, middle-aged photographer, who wears a casual striped blazer with a shirt and black-rimmed glasses, deconstructing not only the stereotypical image of the shady and unkempt pedophile<sup>28</sup> but also the Aristotelian idea prevalent in fairy tales that bad people are always physically repulsive as well. Nevertheless, Jeff's plans with Hayley are obviously predatory from the beginning, as one of his first questions to her concern her previous sexual experiences. He teases her for being a baby and a little girl, and simultaneously tries to woo her by saying that she looks and acts more mature than the age she claims to be. Their shallow conversation is followed by a scenic car ride from the café through the forest, which leads not to the Grandmother's but to the Wolf's house. The focus on Hayley's content and enticing facial expression during the ride already suggests that it is her who is luring him into her trap, and not the other way around. Jeff's home is a modern bachelor pad with a photography studio, minimalist furniture, and bright-colored walls with large artistic photographs of girls and women on them. As soon as they arrive, as if to comfort Hayley, who immediately notices

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25 Orenstein, p. 5.

26 Bettelheim, p. 80.

27 Beckett, p. 13.

28 Henry, p. 70.

the photos, he clarifies that he does not have sex with his underage models, but only because he knows the legal boundaries of his risky game.

From the moment he sees Hayley at the café, Jeff goes through a range of emotions, which are perfectly complemented by cinematographic effects. First, he tries to cover his excitement in order to make Hayley feel comfortable and safe. His wolfish nature nevertheless becomes undeniably apparent early on, for in this otherwise digitally not manipulated film, his mouth is stretched out in the scene when the drugs start to have their effect on him and he screams at Hayley to stop with her erotic dance. This single visual modification of Jeff's face, immediately before which he asks her to look at his eyes, not only makes him appear scarier and more surreal, but also hints at the renowned dialogue between the cross-dressed Wolf in Grandma's clothes and Little Red.

Second, he acts stunned when she calls him a pedophile, embracing the role of the falsely-accused victim, and at the same time making the spectators question the righteousness of Hayley's mission. In addition to violating his personal space by tying him up, she also threatens to mutilate his body by castrating him. It is during this scene that the two of them truly start communicating and Jeff recounts his Freudian excuse, a story about his sexual awakening with his cousin Linnie. He believes that his aunt threatening to cut his penis off when she noticed how her daughter and nephew were playing traumatized him and left him wanting for the bodies of young girls not unlike his cousin's. The cinematography and distinctively lamenting music in this scene lead spectators to sympathize with Jeff, partly because there is no "balancing rape scene" that would in any way legitimize such a violent action.<sup>29</sup> In rape-revenge films, the act of violence itself is always in the narrative focus, for it is what provokes and fuels the narrative, and therefore must always be included in the story, though not necessarily in a visual manner.<sup>30</sup> If we take this into consideration, along with the fact that the verification and the definition of rape are both subject to who tells the story,<sup>31</sup> it is not the rape and murder of the missing girl, but the fake castration scene narrated

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<sup>29</sup> Henry, pp. 73-75.

<sup>30</sup> Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, "Introduction," in *Rape-Revenge Film: A Critical Study* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2011), 3-19, pp. 3-4.

<sup>31</sup> Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver, "Introduction: Rereading Rape," in *Rape and Representation*, eds Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 1-15, p. 1.

primarily from Jeff's limited point of view that functions as the momentous violent act in *Hard Candy*.

Third, Jeff's calm and melancholic approach soon turns into rage and panic as he gets tired of the oppressed role of the victim. Following Hayley's first actual pain-inducing act of violence when she tases him, he grabs a knife and starts looking for Hayley, appearing and acting more and more like a madman. His voice deepens perceptibly here, to the extent that it turns into a wolfish growl, and he angrily and vengefully stabs an artistic photograph of a girl hanging on the wall in the genital area. Hayley lures him on the top of the roof, where he asks a revealing question—"which do you want to fuck first, me or the knife?"<sup>32</sup>—, making it more and more likely that he is capable of rape and murder, of which she has been accusing him all along. The conditions of his assisted suicide, namely, that she would destroy all evidence against him if he hanged himself, finally prove his culpability, and also erase any possibility of remorse on his side, leaving him in the position of the gnarly and clearly guilty Wolf forever.

He thus changes his attitude three times, which closely coincide with the three times that he escapes from being tied up. According to Bruno Bettelheim, the number three is a significant number in fairy tales, and may refer either to the three aspects of the mind—the id, the ego and the superego—<sup>33</sup> or to sexuality, for there are three sexual characteristics,<sup>34</sup> both of which could explain the three different characters and personalities that Jeff demonstrates. As has already been mentioned, Hayley's character is just as malleable, since she also adopts the personalities of three distinct characters throughout the film: she goes from naïve teenager to self-righteous fille fatale and, finally, to a distressed teenager with a very troubled look on her face and possibly even a glimpse of regret in her eyes.

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<sup>32</sup> *Hard Candy*.

<sup>33</sup> Bettelheim, p. 102.

<sup>34</sup> Bettelheim, p. 219.

## LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD'S STORY

Throughout her long history, Little Red Riding Hood, who is seen as “a symbol of childhood innocence” in children’s stories,<sup>35</sup> has, paradoxically, taken up the roles of seductive temptress, Lolita-like nymphet, helpless virgin, and innocent young girl ready to enter womanhood in various adaptations of her story. Bruno Bettelheim, similarly to most modern rewriters of the tale, is very critical of Perrault because he is responsible for introducing Little Red Riding Hood as a fallen woman who wants to be seduced via the poetic moral at the end of his adaptation of the folktale.<sup>36</sup> *Hard Candy* inadvertently challenges this degrading portrayal with a puzzling rape-revenge narrative and a modern *vagina dentata* myth<sup>37</sup> in which Red Riding Hood perplexes not only the Wolf but the audience as well.

If we consider *Hard Candy* as a twisted neo-noir, Hayley can be seen as both the detective and the young vamp or fille fatale, while Jeff plays the role of the anti-hero or criminal. Originally, the femme fatale had been seen as an empowered woman who could achieve her goals without the help of men, but since then, she has been given the sexist and simplistic designation of a self-centered and entitled woman who uses her body to get her way. The young femme fatale’s, in other words the fille fatale’s, only definition is in accordance with this sexist definition, and describes the femme fatale-in-training as “an adolescent or younger girl who knows how to use her looks to get what she wants,” and who mostly appears in rape or other kinds of revenge films.<sup>38</sup> The online definition of the fille fatale is thus set in the same misogynistic context as the femme fatale. Hayley, however, exceeds this simplistic character description, for she noticeably wears “womanliness” as a mask<sup>39</sup> to portray the images of the *ingénue* and the vamp, and uses her wit as well as her looks to avenge the rape and murder of an innocent girl.

At the beginning of the film, she resembles the illustrations of Perrault’s literary tale by Gustave Doré, whose portrayals of a very young fair-haired girl with an angel’s face opposite a ferocious wolf already tended to convey notions

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35 Orenstein, pp. 3-5.

36 Bettelheim, pp. 166-167.

37 Henry, p. 68.

38 “Fille Fatale.”

39 Doane, p. 25.

of sexuality and violence. In these drawings, a flirtatious Little Red was at once mesmerized and dominated by the phallic gaze of the Wolf,<sup>40</sup> similarly to how Hayley appears to be impressed by Jeff at the café in *Hard Candy*. Soon, however, her behavior changes drastically, and, despite the fact that her clothes, particularly her sports bra, emphasize her young age and changing body, she is seen as seductive by the Wolf, the pedophilic adult male. It is exactly this element, the general disinclination to apply the most prominent feature of the femme fatale to younger girls—namely, the overrepresentation and the exploitation of the feminine body<sup>41</sup>—which is the reason for the rare use of the term and of the character of the fille fatale, but *Hard Candy* overcomes this issue. In fact, the only sexually charged moment controlled by Jeff is when he wipes chocolate off her lips in public at the café, while the rest of the scenes, for example, when she dances in her underwear in his private home, are performed according to a child's interpretation of being seductive. Hayley stresses that “[j]ust because a girl knows how to imitate a woman, does not mean she is ready to do what a woman does,”<sup>42</sup> and that is exactly what she does: she imitates the ideal of eroticism shaped by the gaze of the generic adult male. While the trademark color red of Red Riding Hood, as well as of Hayley, is a symbol of “violent emotions, very much including sexual ones,”<sup>43</sup> Hayley is not yet psychologically ready for these. During her scavenger hunt through Jeff's house, for example, she finds a gun, but, not knowing what to do with it, she simply tosses it onto the bed. Her treatment of this obviously phallic symbol<sup>44</sup> suggests that she is only performing roles, but is in fact too young or immature to grasp the meaning of sexuality or violence. The filmmakers wished that Ellen Page had appeared more feminine and sexual,<sup>45</sup> but in my opinion, she managed to find the balance between girl and woman necessary for her ambiguous role as a young femme fatale, so that the viewer can never decide whether she is truly a teenager or a young adult who knows how to act.

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40 Jack Zipes, “A Second Gaze at Little Red Riding Hood's Trials and Tribulations,” in *The Lion and the Unicorn* 7/8 (1983-1984), 78-109, p. 78, *Project MUSE*, accessed 28 December 2013.

41 Doane, p. 2.

42 *Hard Candy*.

43 Bettelheim, p. 171.

44 Jeffrey A. Brown, “If Looks Could Kill: Power, Revenge, and Stripper Movies,” in *Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in the Movies*, eds Martha McCaughey and Neal King (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 52-77, p. 63.

45 “Creating *Hard Candy*.”



Jeff falls into the trap of trusting the initial persona of the clueless young girl, but make no mistakes, Hayley, as a *fille fatale*, “knows what she wants and definitely knows how to reach her aims,”<sup>46</sup> and is not afraid to hurt others in the course of doing so either. Hayley, like any *femme fatale*, “is generally beautiful, pretty, (often strikingly) clever and intelligent, very deceitful, manipulative, and greatly ambitious.”<sup>47</sup> Unlike in the fairy tale, there is no mother figure in *Hard Candy* who could warn the young girl, possibly because Hayley as a self-sufficient *fille fatale* has no need for that, but it is still unsettling that the only two figures who have the potential to help both Jeff and his victims—Judy Tokuda, a nosy neighbor, and Janelle, Jeff’s ex-girlfriend—are too ignorant to do anything. In a dramatic and calculated turn of events, after exclaiming “[p]laytime is over,” Hayley sheds the nymphet persona as if by flipping a switch, and transforms into an avenging angel or an inhumane sociopath, who identifies with “every little girl [Jeff] ever watched, touched, hurt, screwed, killed.”<sup>48</sup> To make the transformation more apparent, Hayley even puts on Jeff’s jacket and black-rimmed glasses, thus taking on even the role of the Wolf for the time being. The problem is that, as Claire Henry points out, spectatorial identification with the avenger is necessary to approve of the revenge as a righteous act, but by switching the viewpoints so many times, it is made impossible for the spectator to truly or lengthily identify with either character,<sup>49</sup> and, as a result, the spectator begins to question the morality of retorting rape with rape.

During the castration scene, Hayley puts on scrubs and sets out to perform her “little preventative maintenance” to victimize and traumatize Jeff,<sup>50</sup> without a hint of the previously seen angelic young girl. Although Hayley never actually performs an intrusion of Jeff’s body, she appears to him as the embodied representation of castration anxiety in a quite literal way, which is a common attribute of the archetypal *femme fatale*.<sup>51</sup> At this point, Hayley loses the advantage of a rightful

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46 Zsófia Anna Tóth, “The *Femme Fatale*,” in *Merry Murderers: The Farcical (Re)Figuration of the Femme Fatale in Maurine Dallas Watkins’ Chicago (1927) and its Various Adaptations* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 7–71, p. 32.

47 Tóth, p. 7.

48 *Hard Candy*.

49 Henry, p. 71.

50 Henry, p. 74.

51 Doane, p. 2.

and ethical avenger over her victim irrevocably,<sup>52</sup> and, as many Little Reds have done before her, she also risks crossing over into “the moral wrong.”<sup>53</sup> While she takes Jeff’s life apart piece by piece, not even in the end of the film do we learn anything about Hayley’s background, her motives, or her true identity, just as it would be in the case of a femme fatale.<sup>54</sup> If she were a legitimate femme fatale, her identity as a woman would be the secret to be unmasked, but, even without that, visibility and the epistemophilic and scopophilic drives of her victim—meaning Jeff’s desire to both see her and know her for who she is—define her and push the narrative into full motion.<sup>55</sup> Just like the femme fatale, however, Hayley “is dependent upon perceptual ambiguity and ideas about the limits of vision in relation to knowledge,”<sup>56</sup> in this case, due to her performances of different prescribed female identities. The image of her face mirrored in the metal table, in particular as she leans on it to think about how to begin the surgery, reflects and demonstrates her multiple identity performances or personalities. Claire Henry claims that in this scene, the focal act of the film, not only Jeff but Hayley as well loses her identity through the symbolical castration, for she sheds her nymphet persona and reveals her true agenda of revenging the death of another young girl.<sup>57</sup> Instead of losing her identity, I think she actually reveals it in this scene, for I simply see her previous differing behaviors as performances covering up her real identity as a vengeful young adult.

Greenhill and Kohm argue in their analysis that Hayley and Jeff are very closely connected because, similarly to that of Perrault, the Red Riding Hood of *Hard Candy* is also “ingested by the wolf [when he takes her to his home], and thus the distinction between them blurs radically,”<sup>58</sup> making it even more difficult to tell the victim and the aggressor apart. Furthermore, Cristina Bacchilega also points out that Red Riding Hood always ends up somewhere inside, whether she survives or not: she is either devoured by the Wolf, left inside the Grandmother’s home, or

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52 Henry, p. 73.

53 Orenstein, p. 5.

54 Doane, p. 1.

55 Doane, p. 1.

56 Doane, p. 3.

57 Henry, p. 76.

58 Greenhill and Kohm, p. 38.

domesticated by the Huntsman—in all cases subjected to a man.<sup>59</sup> Hayley in *Hard Candy*, however, escapes the stereotypical role of the shallow teenager, and, once again, she is the one showing the Wolf what big teeth she has. As a *fille fatale*, she gains agency and even succeeds in taking revenge, though at quite a high cost. Although the *femme fatale* is often seen as evil and is traditionally doomed to fail, as is indicated by both Mary Ann Doane and Zsófia Anna Tóth,<sup>60</sup> this time it is Jeff who gets punished and killed, while Hayley survives. She does, at the same time, look extremely distressed and broken, and is obviously carrying the weight of his mistake inside her when she is leaving the site. With a clever timing, it is only during the very last scene of the film that Hayley puts on the iconic red hood, which, if the reference has not been obvious before, connects the film to the fairy tale in retrospection.

#### CONCLUSION

*Hard Candy* was not originally meant to be a revisionist adaptation of “Little Red Riding Hood,” although there are numerous faint yet undeniable clues connecting the film to the centuries-old folktale. Nevertheless, if viewed with the narrative of the tale in mind, one can gain meaningful insights into the characteristics and motives of the tale’s main characters’ alter-egos. By changing the general setting and complicating the personalities of the two main characters, the film moves past Charles Perrault’s age-old moral, and demonstrates an alternative ending where the cunning Wolf is defeated by an even shrewder Little Red Riding Hood after an act of violence—similar to the Grandmother’s sacrifice in oral and literary versions of the tale—has already occurred.

The two main characters of *Hard Candy* show a unique dynamism that—with the help of certain cinematographic tools, such as portraiture and lighting—make it difficult not only to tell the good apart from the bad, but also to define one character in the absence of the other. It always depends on the relative position of Jeff whether the viewer sees Hayley as a villain or a vigilante, as a Wolf or

59 Cristina Bacchilega, “Not Re(a)d Once and for All: ‘Little Red Riding Hood’s’ Voices in Performance,” in *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 49–70, p. 58.

60 Doane, p. 2; Tóth, p. 7.

as a timid girl in a red hood. Wolf and Little Red exist in such an ambiguous and co-dependent relationship throughout the film that the ending leaves most viewers perplexed, which was obviously a conscious goal of the filmmakers. Identifying Hayley as a *fille fatale*, a younger, less mature, and, most importantly, less sexually experienced version of the *femme fatale*, helps bring together and understand her varying and changing performances and personality traits, including her inclination to change roles according to the situation and to use her body to reach her goals. This heroine is no longer an errant child, but neither is she a victim, as have been previous versions of Little Red Riding Hood. She becomes an agent and a teller of her own tale, and, as an ideal *femme fatale-in-training*, avenges Jeff the Wolf who refuses to take responsibility for his actions with the help of both her wits and looks.

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MARIA ANTONIETTA STRUZZIERO

## Gendered Topographies of Desire in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* and Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*

"CITIES, LIKE DREAMS, ARE MADE OF DESIRES AND FEARS"

ITALO CALVINO, *INVISIBLE CITIES*<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

In the opening paragraph of his 1882 essay on Venice, later included in *Italian Hours* (1909), Henry James admitted that he felt somehow impudent in pretending to talk about the city because, "ha[ving] been painted and described many thousands of times," there was "nothing new to be said about her."<sup>2</sup>

With its peculiar topographical structure, the imagery of its faded glory, and the idea of beauty in decay, on the verge of disappearing into nothingness, Venice is a central creative topos for Western literature and art, anatomized both through the literary and the visual lens by innumerable artists, aptly described as "the great intertextual echo chamber of Western literature."<sup>3</sup> It has been, and still

<sup>1</sup> Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> Henry James, *Italian Hours*, ed. John Auchard (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Jason Harding, "The Myth of Venice in the Decline of Eliot and Pound," in *Venice and the Cultural Imagination: 'This Strange Dream Upon the Water'*, eds Michael O'Neill, Mark Sandy, and Sarah Wootton (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012), 141-156, p. 143.



is, a source of inspiration for the European cultural imagination, acting as a setting for diverse writers and artists who have transformed it into a myth of great symbolic force, so both a desired city and a city of desire.

The erotic appeal exerted by the inherently sensual body of the Serenissima; its curving outline surrounded and penetrated by water; the narrow alleys and the uncanny silence of the canals that form a dark, mysterious labyrinth encircling its centre – the womb-like enclosure of Piazza San Marco – are all attributes that make of Venice the most iconic of urban spaces. It is “a magnificent and stupendous reality” for Charles Dickens, superior even to “the wildest visions of the Arabian Nights,”<sup>4</sup> so the ideal imaginary scenario for stories associated with sexuality and the transgressiveness of desire. It is a city that has been frequently figured as a female creature, to explore and signify it into language, mostly from a male perspective, as Henry James does when he imagines Venice to be a “creature [who] varies like a nervous woman,” with whom you establish “a perpetual love-affair,” and that “you desire to embrace [...] to caress [...] to possess.”<sup>5</sup>

A male perspective is also traceable in Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* (1974), where Venice, concealed behind the screen of the cities that Marco Polo describes to Kublai Khan, is represented as an alluring yet fragmented female body, an object of the gaze and the site of the two protagonists’ speculation and pleasure, a discourse that originates a topography of male desire. In Jeanette Winterson’s *The Passion* (1987), instead, Venice resists mapping and definition. It is a living character and a powerful symbol of both Eros and Thanatos in connection with the two protagonists – Villanelle and Henri, respectively – and a polysemantic paradigm of meaning that, refusing to set up a dichotomy between male and female passion, celebrates a form of desire free from the constraints of gender. Above all, in its spatial liminality and provocative indeterminacy, it unfolds subversive possibilities for the representation of sex and gender.

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4 Charles Dickens, *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, The Pilgrim Edition, ed. Kathleen Tillotson, vol. 4 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 217.

5 James, pp. 11-12.

## A DISCOURSE ON ABSENCE

Calvino's *Invisible Cities* is the kind of text Roland Barthes calls writerly: a "plural" text that does not simply have "several meanings" but that "accomplishes the very plurality of meaning."<sup>6</sup> Its polyphony demands the active interaction with and implication of the reader, who validates the truth of the text in her/his own terms, constructing meaning out of the multiple, contradictory discourses provided. This is proved also by Kublai's unusual use of the first-person plural *we* on the first page of the book – a use which is not the simple royal plural because the Khan regularly refers to himself in the singular hereafter.

*Invisible Cities* is a rewriting of *The Travels of Marco Polo*, a text which acts as a mental landscape for Calvino's novel. It is divided into nine sections in which the explorer Marco Polo portrays the cities of the Empire he has visited to Kublai Khan. Each section consists of descriptions of five cities, except for the opening and closing ones, twice as long, which contain descriptions of ten cities. Every section begins and ends with the untitled conversations in italics between the young explorer and the old emperor, the "nonspace or metaspace of (male) mind,"<sup>7</sup> where male voices, conversing, give birth to the invisible cities and assign them female names – cities that become proteiform erotic signs and codes syntagmatically organized in narratives. The names are mostly exotic: Diomira, Hypatia, Phyllis, Zemrude, etc., and occasionally hint at the qualities of the cities. In fact, cities are also identified and defined by the thematic category in which they are grouped: Cities & Memory; Cities & Desire; Cities & Signs; Thin Cities; Trading Cities; Cities & Eyes; Cities & Names; Cities & the Dead; Cities & the Sky; Continuous Cities; Hidden Cities.

Calvino uses the motif of the journey with its traditional patriarchal attributes of exploration, conquest, and mastery. The outcome is a narrative in which woman is Otherized, inscribed as the mysterious *object* to the male *subject*, the site of male speculation and pleasure, exposed to his desiring gaze, and translated into the erotic code which constitutes one of the systems of meaning of the text.

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6 Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," in *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, eds Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh, 3rd ed. (London: Arnold, 1996), 191-197, p. 194.

7 Marilyn Schneider, "Subject or Object? *Mr Palomar* and *Invisible Cities*," in *Calvino Revisited*, ed. Franco Ricci (Toronto: University of Toronto Italian Studies, 1989), 171-187, p. 178.

The peculiarity of the novel is that the concrete object, Venice, a sort of Lacanian *objet petit a*,<sup>8</sup> is openly mentioned only once but evoked in the descriptions of the other cities – a metonymic representational displacement that signals the endless textual circulation of desire. So Isidora is the “dreamed-of city” of “a young man” that he reaches only “in his old age” (IC 8).<sup>9</sup> It is made of signs, “images of things that mean other things” (IC 13), and ambiguous icons whose referents are forever shifting yet constantly quested after – all visions originated by Marco’s archetypal desired city of origin. Gradually, Venice comes to life refracted in a sort of Cubist portrait “*made of fragments*” (IC 164) as the epitome of eroticism and the object of Marco’s desire, a city that hunts his memory and that can be represented only through indirect images.

In contrast with the nonspace where the conversations between the two men take place are the cities: spaces which, though invisible, are real in so far as they are concrete. The invisible cities are actually objects, female objects and “*emblems*” (IC 22) that Kublai wishes to know in order to control and possess, parts of his decaying Empire which he is no longer able to govern.

*Perhaps, Kublai thought, the empire is nothing but a zodiac of the mind’s phantasms. “On the day when I know all the emblems,” he asked Marco, “shall I be able to possess my empire at last?” And the Venetian answered: “Sire, do not believe it. On that day you will be an emblem among emblems. (IC 23)*

Marco Polo, instead, represents praxis: he is the active traveler, driven by a desire for change, and the embodiment of positive, creative forces set in dialectic tension with the Khan’s dominance and alienation.

So in *Invisible Cities*, the reader has to enter a metaphorical discursive order and has to place her/himself in the process of semiosis. Piecing together Marco’s iconic text, the reader will finally capture the essence of Venice that is, like Eutropia, one of the places the Venetian explorer has visited, “not one, but all these cities together,” an “ambiguous miracle” (IC 64-65).

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8 See Jacques Lacan, *Encore: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York and London: Norton, 1999).

9 All parenthesized references with the abbreviation IC are to this edition: Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (London: Vintage, 1997).

Marco refers to his city obliquely: he represses its memory in his unconscious yet allows it to surface constantly in the multiplicity of the cities he describes. His recollection is a sort of Freudian return of the repressed, and Venice is a place that has no univocal referent in reality but exists in the different signifiers of Marco's discourse.

Only in the dialogue at the beginning of section six does language finally voice the loss, and Venice is named explicitly:

*"Sire, now I have told you about all the cities I know."*

*"There is still one of which you never speak."*

*Marco Polo bowed his head.*

*"Venice," the Khan said.*

*Marco smiled. "What else do you believe I have been talking to you about?"*

*The emperor did not turn a hair. "And yet I have never heard you mention that name."*

*And Polo said: "Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice."*

*"When I ask you about other cities, I want to hear about them. And about Venice, when I ask you about Venice."*

*"To distinguish the other cities' qualities, I must speak of a first city that remains implicit. For me it is Venice." (IC 86-87)*

Marco's reluctance to name Venice is reminiscent of Dickens's representational evasion in "An Italian Dream," the chapter he devoted to the city in *Pictures from Italy* (1846), where, after having evoked it as a dream-vision in a crescendo of feelings, only in the last sentence of the final paragraph can he utter its name: "I have many and many a time, thought since, of this strange Dream upon the water: half-wandering if it lie there yet, and if its name be VENICE."<sup>10</sup> He almost fears that by naming it, he would discover it to be simply a dream and see it disappear.

At last, Venice emerges not from water, as it does in actual reality, but from a disjointed narration, a distorted temporality, and a kaleidoscope of signifiers that enhance the quality of an oneiric vision, not dissimilar from both

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Dickens, *American Notes and Pictures from Italy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 336.

Dickens's dream-vision and Winterson's "invented city" (*P* 109).<sup>11</sup> In Calvino's text, though there is an apparent celebration of things, of the visible, in the end, it is the invisible that is reality, the unwritten world of Venice which, though never or rarely spoken of, is the central compass point of the fragmented discourse Marco uses to speak of it.

The object of Marco's desire, the city/woman that haunts him, is continually displaced metonymically and eludes him as it is difficult to express the essence of Eros; in fact, Calvino maintains, "Eros can be represented only through indirect images" because "the words and images of eroticism have become worn out and of no use"<sup>12</sup> – a view that foregrounds his postmodern mistrust of language. In *Invisible Cities*, eroticism, signified by the Serenissima, is concealed behind the labyrinthine symbolic screen of the different cities – visible signs of Marco's erotic dream. The final portrait is that of a psychological landscape painted by the changing seasons of the mind and kept alive by a desire founded in, and intensified by, absence. To Marco, Venice is inaccessible through the usual coordinates used to explore it, being a city of the soul and the object of desire that refuses appropriation.

#### CAPTURING A DREAM OF DESIRE

The opening sections of *Invisible Cities* offer the hermeneutic key to access the text, as they enucleate some of its central motifs. In fact, the themes of memory and desire, as Marilyn Schneider argues, "crowd the titles in the early parts of the book, establishing them as foundation concepts."<sup>13</sup> After section three, the words *memory* and *desire* disappear from the table of contents of the sections, though both themes continue to permeate the unconscious of the text till the end. In fact, all the cities are described through memory and pervaded by nostalgic desire, the spring that drives Marco on his journey, germinating the invisible cities – in reality, female objects scrutinized by desiring male eyes.

<sup>11</sup> All parenthesized references with the abbreviation *P* are to this edition: Jeanette Winterson, *The Passion* (London: Vintage, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> Italo Calvino, *Una pietra sopra* (Torino: Einaudi, 1980), p. 257. My translation, M. A. S.

<sup>13</sup> Schneider, p. 182.

The first page of the novel sets the stage for the story's unfolding, as it "presents signals or traces of the possible worlds within the discourse of the text": a dialogue of two different voices, one old, the other young, "speaking across the space of continents, from the beginning of one civilization to the end of another."<sup>14</sup>

These italicized sections form a frame inside which Marco's descriptions of the cities alternate with the philosophical dialogues with the emperor who feels the weight of his position and the melancholy of old age, aware of the "*endless, formless ruin*" (IC 5) of his empire, "*rotting like a corpse in a swamp*" (IC 59). Only in the presence of Marco does he fathom the reason for his restlessness: he has come to possess the sum of all wonders, and yet he cannot experience any sense of astonishment.

*Invisible Cities* is fundamentally a journey into the unconscious of the two protagonists, an in-depth exploration disclosing a male desire in which women are chased. This is exemplified by Zobeide, a labyrinthine city built by a group of men who dreamed of trapping a naked "woman running at night through an unknown city" (IC 46). Yet they lost her, and what was left was Zobeide, an "ugly city" (IC 46) where woman is inscribed as absence, the symbol of unending desire. It is the Lacanian lack that drives Marco to move from city to city along the signifying chain, longing to fill his inner gap.

The images associated with women are often violent as in Hypatia, where Marco faces a Freudian scene of death, sexual aggressiveness, and castration enacted by young girls who have committed suicide and lay in the lagoons, their hair like that of a Medusa, "green with seaweed" (IC 47). The snake-haired Medusa, an image that, according to Freud, represents male fear of castration, is a typical "text-image," the "morphologically female [...] personified obstacle [...] fixed at a certain point of the plot-space."<sup>15</sup> It is a boundary that the hero must cross to penetrate the other space and bring to successful completion his task as the active originator of culture and the creator of differences.

In Hypatia, beautiful naked women on horses whip young men in violent sexual play when they dare approach them. Drugged adolescents with dazed eyes and lips glued to an opium pipe, childish philosophers, and chained slaves are trapped there, in an atmosphere of cruelty and deceitfulness – both qualities embodied by

<sup>14</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, "Semiotic Models, *Invisible Cities*," *Yale Italian Studies* 2.1 (1978), 13-37, p. 16.

<sup>15</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 118-119.

females. However, in this scene, it is Marco's process of decodification that fails him: in fact, the philosopher he meets admonishes him that "signs form a language" (IC 48), but not the one he thinks he knows, and he is unable to decode the inhabitants' strange language. A similar scene is found in *The Passion*: when Henri sees Venice for the first time, the city's mutable reality unsettles his known world as "it is not built on any lines that [he] can fathom" (P 110). Both characters experience a sense of loss because they do not possess the right syntax of reality to make sense of the world and are puzzled by the deceptive, elusive nature of the city they face, Hypatia and Venice, respectively.

In Calvino's novel, the topography of male desire inscribes a clichéd view of woman either as a temptress to be appropriated and possessed, or as the beautiful cruel lady who resists men's desire for appropriation, who submits men and deprives them of their masculinity. Alternatively, women are merely passive objects that offer themselves unashamedly to male observation. The implication is to establish a male/female dichotomy, a binarism that manifests itself through scenes of Eastern spaces and women as exotic and often dangerous. These images belong to the set of ideas and tropes labelled as *Orientalism* by Edward Said to designate the imperialistic, exclusively male discourse articulated by the West to (mis)represent and (mis)interpret the East as the mysterious *Other*. The aim is to know and thereby to dominate it. This constructed view or *Othering* is set in opposition to the West's self-representation as allegedly *superior*, more civilized and enlightened than the East.<sup>16</sup> This sort of inverted mirror that the West uses to construe its image of the Orient can be observed in many of Calvino's cities/women.

As in *The Passion*, a number of cities in Calvino's book have a labyrinthine structure, as in Valdrada, Usapia, and Beersheba, where there is a dark "underground city, the receptacle of everything base and unworthy" (IC 111). This feature originates the concept of a city within a city, often with a chiastic structure: in fact, it frequently contains its *Other* inside – a symbolic polarization and inversion. It is a doubling structure that Calvino associates with knowledge, a sort of Lacanian mirror that allows one to create the sense of a self and to see one's otherwise invisible boundaries. This dualistic code also underlines the dual points of observation of reality: Kublai's abstract way and Marco's more problematic,

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16 See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

utopian yet, at the same time, more realistic awareness. This is only an apparent contradiction that can be understood by taking a more comprehensive view of the author's production. In Calvino's works the fantastic, rather than providing a form of escapism, is instrumentally used to voice his socio-political concern.

In *The Passion*, Winterson refers to a "hidden [...] city within a city" (P 115), "a city of mazes [where] you may set off from the same place to the same place every day and never go by the same route" (P 49) – words that are similar to the ones Calvino uses to describe Esmeralda, with its "network of canals and [...] streets [that] span and intersect each other" (IC 88). As a consequence, "the shortest distance between two points [...] is not a straight line but a zigzag that ramifies in tortuous optional routes" (IC 88). These elements provide the framework for the role-playing and masquerade of modern identity the two writers envision – a device to give form to the plural, decentered subject. Yet, the motif of the maze and the double aspect of Venice serve different purposes: in Calvino, the labyrinthine structure of the city is the objective correlative of the male view of the mystery of femininity; in Winterson, it is the metaphor for the tangled realm of the self and the intricacies of their passions, as well as for Villanelle's love story with the Queen of Spades. As Paulina Palmer maintains, "it also signifies the clandestine behavior [...] to which lesbian lovers are forced to resort in heteropatriarchal culture."<sup>17</sup>

In *Invisible Cities*, Eros is a self-destructive force, and the cities are places of desire and interdiction; this happens in Fedora, Armilla, and Chloe, where all dreams of possessions are frustrated and unsatisfied erotic desire promotes narcissism and violence. The emperor, obsessed with the fabulous and exotic cities he visualizes through Marco's description, longs to appropriate and fuse them into one vast empire, as if they were a body to possess. However, these cities refuse to be constructed as female erotic objects and to bear the meaning inscribed on them by the other; so they become "actants,"<sup>18</sup> real subjects that articulate their own desires and gain autonomy in the mind of the reader.

<sup>17</sup> Paulina Palmer, "The Passion: Storytelling, Fantasy, Desire," in *I'm Telling You Stories: Jeanette Winterson and the Politics of Reading*, eds Helena Grice and Tim Woods (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998), 103–116, p. 114.

<sup>18</sup> A. J. Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*, trans. D. McDowell, R. Schleifer, and A. Velie (Lincoln: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 95.



For Calvino, Venice is invisible not because it cannot be seen but because it does not exist. Venice is not one but an infinite number of cities with an infinite number of pasts, presents, and futures. The faces of the city are limited only by Marco Polo's ability to recognize them, name them, commit them to memory, and catalogue their gods and demons, desires and fears.

#### THE ENCHANTED CITY OF MAZES AND DISGUISES

Winterson's exploration of sexuality and desire in *The Passion* is informed by feminist theories. However, for the description of Venice and its imaginary topography – a heady compound of sensuality and secrecy; masks and masquerading; disguise and uncertain identities; duplicity and desire – she is indebted to Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, an intertextual presence she herself acknowledges. In an interview with Margaret Reynolds, she maintains that “all texts work off other texts,” adding: “working off Calvino was a way of aligning myself with the European tradition where I feel much more comfortable.”<sup>19</sup> There are a number of traces and echoes of Calvino's work in her novel: both pieces feature the use of female imagery to describe the city; its urban labyrinthine topography and maze-like structure with the presence of the city's double, often in the form of a mirror, with a dark underworld hidden in its very heart; the ever-changing nature of the city; along with its utopian dimension and carnivalesque tendency.

Winterson reworks Calvino's text and transforms his male erotic fantasy into one which is feminist in emphasis, even in the choice of having a double narrative voice, a male and a female one, often echoing each other. In doing so, she opens up androgynous narrative spaces, as the two appear to be not separate creatures but the two fluid sides of a single ideal subject whose identity rejects the traditional binary division of the Symbolic Order and challenges its monolithic gender construction. A key role in this transformation is played by Venice: it is no longer an invisible city but a living presence of shifting borders; an apt stage upon which an erotic masquerade of multiple identities can be played out and passionate dramas can be enacted; a terrain that, interacting with the protagonists, mirrors back their psychological and mental attitude to it. It is the place where the

19 Margaret Reynolds, “Interview with Jeanette Winterson,” in *Jeanette Winterson: The Essential Guide*, eds Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes (London: Vintage, 2003), 11–29, p. 19.

crucial events of their life happen and the mythical element of water – an Other world of dark waterways alluding to the Freudian unconscious – leads to insight and metamorphosis both of the self and of the clichés of the language of love.

In *The Passion*, Venice is a central symbol in relation to both protagonists. Winterson herself clarifies the role cities have in much of her fiction. She believes that cities are actually “living things [with] their own energy” and “repositories of the past”<sup>20</sup> and that their peculiar inner lives continue to speak to us across time, if we are sensitive to it. This is a truth that Henri, the male protagonist, will discover about Venice and absorb at the end of his inward journey.

Set in France and Venice at the time of the Napoleonic wars and using the motif of the journey, as does Calvino, *The Passion* traces two opposite paradigms of desire and passion through the retrospective stories told by the two narrator-protagonists, Henri and Villanelle. It is an intercultural dialogue of voices as in *Invisible Cities* where, collapsing boundaries of continents and civilizations, the West and the East meet in Marco and Kublai. On the one hand, there is the masculine narrative of Henri, a young French soldier who leaves his family to follow his passion for Napoleon, becoming his personal cook. On the other hand, there is the fluid, feminine trajectory of Villanelle, a bisexual Venetian girl with webbed feet and a tendency to cross-dress, who works as a card dealer in the Casino. She is sold by her husband to be a prostitute in the French army; here she meets Henri, who falls in unrequited love with her, though they eventually become lovers and have a daughter together. Henri and Villanelle desert Napoleon during the Russian campaign and set out on a symbolic journey towards Venice, Villanelle’s native city, a Bhaktinian space of masquerades and an ideal place for her because she revels in the freedom the city allows her. Like Beersheba in Calvino’s novel, Venice hides an invisible “inner city” inside itself peopled with “thieves and Jews and children with slant eyes who come from the eastern wastelands without father or mother” (P 53).

As often also happens in the cities described by Calvino, Venice has a dark subterranean soul of Kristevan abjection<sup>21</sup> and marginality below the mirror of its glittering façade, where the traveler/reader encounters the Other of Western civilization. It is a place “hidden away in the inner city,” where “the dark canals

20 Reynolds, pp. 19–20.

21 See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

were as dark as ever” and where Villanelle’s weird “philosopher friend” leans on her balcony, wearing “a crown [...] made out of rats tied in a circle by their tails” (P 74). In foregrounding a more sinister side of the city, both Calvino and Winterson show their awareness of the rather traditional black vision of Venice as a site of mystery, danger, and crime – a myth deeply rooted back in time.

Villanelle takes Henri away from Napoleon’s battlefields of “devastation and rape” to explore her fantastic feminine “cities of the interior” (P 68). “Arriving at Venice by sea, as one must, is like seeing an invented city rise up and quiver in the air” (P 109), Henri observes the first time he sees it, overwhelmed by the unreal nature of the city so unlike the ones he knows, being “another space whose geography is uncertain” (P 68). Villanelle guides Henri to chart a different trajectory of passion in a world of encounters, desires, and secret mutations, a world where she can bask in pleasure, passion, and gambling. They reach the “enchanted city” (P 109) of Venice, where “things change” (P 113) – a feature observable also in Irene and Andria – and buildings “spring up overnight and dissolve with the dawn” (P 112). It is an uncanny world of canals and interweaving *calli*, a space that perfectly suits the patterns of a wonderer and nomad like Villanelle, as well as the latent nomadism and transgressiveness of desire itself, but that mystifies Henri, who gets lost in “an impossible maze” (P 110). When he asks Villanelle for a map, she replies, “[t]he cities of the interior do not lie on any map” (P 114). Unable to orient himself in a forest of incomprehensible signs, he experiences a sensation of estrangement, fascinated and repulsed by their deceptive nature. The traditional coordinates of the romantic quester can no longer help Henri because Venice opens up a totally new psychic scenario to his consciousness, “the labyrinthian and muddy canals of an undecidable sailing, of game-playing with fleeting meetings and appearances, with images.”<sup>22</sup> A whole world of chanciness and mutability that disconcerts Henri because the city refuses to be decoded on the basis of ordinary mental frames of references. Within its quivering watery body, meanings are multiple and ever-changing, depending on the observer’s individual ability to translate the city’s peculiar nature according to her/his signifying system.

The peculiarity of the scenery that Venice discloses to Henri’s puzzled observation provokes a dizzy rapture in him. It is a mysterious and unknown lover’s territory that at first he can only vaguely elaborate. His amatory semantic

22 Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 136.

discourse is inadequate to decode the new emotional topography he is confronted with, as his psychological make-up is still dominated by rigid patriarchal clichés and dichotomies. He is ready for a transparent correspondence between signifier/signified, whereas he faces a polyvalence of meaning that transcends his present power of understanding. This new space offers to the sight of the astonished observer views of sunlit squares and canals, as well as a hidden city of “waste and rats” where “no one could live” (P 114), a place of abjection repressed at the bottom of its dark, labyrinthine heart. It is a city with a double nature, possessing a sort of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde personality; however, in Venice, these images do not embody opposite connotations because it is a place where the traditional dichotomous categories of values do not apply, a carnivalesque city that likes hiding behind masks and disguises to escape any easy conceptualization and that calls forth paradoxical and oxymoronic emotions.

“The internal boundaries of Venice are as fluid as the water in its canals; a waterway that has been there for centuries can disappear overnight, a church that has served generations as a geographic signpost can move to the opposite end of the city.”<sup>23</sup> Strangers like Henri can rely on the help of Venetians whose memories provide the indispensable link between space and time. It is a utopian, fantastic topography where “the laws of the real world are suspended” (P 76) – features that are elaborated on in Calvino’s text as well. However, in Winterson’s novel, it is actually the objective correlative of the psychic topography of Henri, a Kristevan *subject in process*,<sup>24</sup> who experiences the loss of the self when crossing the boundaries of his old consciousness and facing its pulverisation into multiple selves.

#### THE PASSION AND PASSIONS: DISCOURSES OF LOVE AND DEATH

In Venice, in its dark subterranean heart, the signifier of the labyrinth of the inner self Henri is questing after, he will bring his journey to completion. In a scene

23 Anne Mihan, *Undoing Differences?: Race and Gender in Selected Works by Toni Morrison and Jeanette Winterson* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2012), p. 68.

24 See Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

that is the re-enactment of Lacan's mirror stage,<sup>25</sup> Henri achieves knowledge, and "what was hidden is revealed" (P 125). He sees Villanelle threatened by her ruthless husband and runs to rescue her: in the deadly embrace of the man he fights with, he sees mirrored the potential violent man *he* might become. He sees a violent version of himself that threatens to swallow him, a person who yearns for passion as violent possession. He kills the enemy Other, thus opting out of the Symbolic modality and the patriarchal Law of the Father with its rigid, oppressive gender roles. When he disengages from this modality, the revolutionary potential of the semiotic disposition explodes into madness, and he ends up enclosed in the asylum of San Servolo, where he retreats into the lost world of the dead and of memory. Ultimately, for Henri, Venice symbolically stands for Thanatos.

Yet, Venice is also a symbol of Eros and the space of passion, especially in connection with Villanelle, whose psychological and emotional make-up is mirrored by the ever-changing surface of the lagoon, the city's labyrinthine canals and borderless nature, as well as by its tendency to masquerade and gamble – features that Villanelle shares with her city. In this case, the city epitomizes a feminine sexuality that flouts dichotomous binary oppositions and, in the continuous references to its fluid, mutable façade, celebrates the fluctuating nature of desire in Villanelle's lesbian love for the Queen of Spades, the woman who will literally steal her most valuable possession, her heart, which Henri will retrieve for her.

Both Villanelle and Venice are elusive, borderless, and liminal, "somewhere between" (P 68) realities; both celebrate ecstatic passion in their bodies and, in their protean tendency, the polysemantic nature of desire and passion. The intricacy of Venice's meandering watery body partakes of the complexity of Villanelle, who is its ideal inhabitant. The city's carnivalesque nature is in harmony with her psychological willingness to wear different masks, cross-dress, and flout dichotomous gender identities. Being born with webbed feet, an attribute that in Venice is a prerogative of men, Villanelle is ready to cross bridges between self/other, because for her "a bridge is a meeting place" (P 57). Winterson's frequent references to bridges in *The Passion* develop Calvino's description of the cities of Phyllis or of Esmeralda, but in her novel, they also carry romantic significance since "for lovers a bridge is a possibility, a metaphor of their chances" (P 57). In his description of the city of Esmeralda, Calvino indulges in portraying the various architectural

25 See Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, eds, *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne*, trans. Jacqueline Rose (New York: Norton, 1985).

styles which the bridges display: they are used by “cats, thieves, illicit lovers” to “move along higher, discontinuous ways, dropping from a rooftop to a balcony, following guttering with acrobats’ steps” (*IC* 88). This passage is echoed by Winterson in a carnivalesque scene set in Venice, when Villanelle observes that

from the wooden frame [...] there are also suspended a number of nets and trapezes. From here acrobats swing over the square, casting grotesque shadows on the dancers below. Now and again, one will dangle by the knees and snatch a kiss from whoever is standing below. (*P* 59)

It is a description that also anticipates the episode when on New Year’s Eve, Villanelle climbs up like a cat along the railings that fringe the villa of the Queen of Spades to catch sight of her lover and her husband through the window, hanging “two storeys in mid-air” (*P* 75).

Winterson’s Venice as a liminal place is the signifier of a feminine erotic economy that stands in opposition to the binary phallocentric pattern of Western thought, collapses all forms of patriarchal dichotomous oppositions, and inscribes a form of passion free of the constraint of gender.

The body of the city is a multi-layered paradigm of meaning revolving around the nature of passion and desire, knowledge and self-knowledge. Besides, the constant vital presence of water assumes a mythical connotation in the double form it takes in Venice: on the one hand, the glittering golden surface of the lagoon; on the other, its dark, at times repulsive, underworld “that is the knowledge of a few” (*P* 53). Water is traditionally a symbolic instrument leading to insight and metamorphosis. Thus, in allowing the two protagonists access to its labyrinthine, engulfing other world of a secret “black [...] waterway” (53), there is an obvious allusion to the unconscious and repressed parts of the human psyche.

Henri’s and Villanelle’s different perceptions of the city mirror the different psychologies and instruments of decoding they adopt in order to know both the physical and the inner realities of the human passions that inhabit the city. Henri is still used to the “straight roads” (*P* 112) of Bonaparte’s conquered and submitted countries; he does not possess the psychological coordinates to orient himself amid the fluid topographical structure of the city. Unlike Henri, who feels like “an exile” (*P* 110) there, Villanelle’s fluid body is one with the mysterious watery body of her “enchanted city” (*P* 109) – a symbiotic relationship that Henri envies.

Yet, against the backdrop of the city, he will also achieve a new awareness of the regenerative power of passion, guided by Villanelle, his own Beatrice-like guide through the hell and heaven of Venice and of “the ambiguities of the heart” (*P* 109), a transformation resulting in changes that expose the limitations of a world-view in rational and dichotomous terms. When this happens, he finally finds a new love discourse, “a postmodern lexicon of slippage, fluidity and dynamism to counter the discursive concepts of fixity, encompassment, and immobility.”<sup>26</sup> His new self will even be willing to believe that the impossible is possible, that Villanelle *can* walk on water, and roses *can* blossom even on a sterile rock in the prison of San Servolo.

Henri’s new love discourse echoes the emotional tones and lyrical utterances of the lover portrayed by Roland Barthes and is articulated in “outbursts of language,” because typically “the lover speaks in bundles of sentences.”<sup>27</sup> Henry’s discourse finds one of its rhetorical realizations in the use of antithetical images or metaphors in which dualities and contradictions are reconciled: “ordinary miracle” (*P* 19), “surprised by the obvious,” “ordinary treasure” (*P* 156). This rhetorical device loads each element of the love discourse with semantic polyvalence, a peculiar trait of the evocation of the love experience according to Julia Kristeva.<sup>28</sup> The renewal of amorous discourse in *The Passion* is activated not only by the transformative power of the beloved; there is also another source of inspiration for the lover’s discourse, and that is the watery body of Venice, figured in terms of a female body – both spaces where imagination and passion liberate the self.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Calvino and Winterson offer highly symbolic portraits of Venice and its cityscape, concerned with representing *their own* perceptions of reality. The two novels suggest a multiple, complex reality, based on personal perception,

26 Helena Grice and Tim Woods, “Grand (Dis)Unified Theories?: Dislocated Discourses in *Gut Symmetries*,” in *I’m Telling You Stories: Jeanette Winterson and the Politics of Reading*, eds Helena Grice and Tim Woods (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998), 117–126, p. 117.

27 Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), pp. 3; 7.

28 See Kristeva, *Tales of Love*.

unbounded by linear conventions of space and time. In Venice, both authors have found one of the Western world's most beguiling cities to serve as an interactive backdrop for their fiction. In this sense, it might be said that these works correspond to what Umberto Eco defines as an "epistemological metaphor," which is offered to the reader as a key to understand and know both the outside world and the inner cities of the interior.<sup>29</sup> Besides, they engage with issues of gender representation in cross-cultural perspectives and are examples of interculturality on different levels. On the one hand, both novels enter into intertextual relationships with other works: Calvino's with *The Travels of Marco Polo*, Jeanette Winterson's with a variety of other texts, including Calvino's. This intercultural dialogue also generates a transformation in the topography of desire which Venice epitomizes: from a masculine one in *Invisible Cities* into a feminine one in *The Passion*. On the other hand, inside the novels themselves, as already observed, there is a border crossing between different value-schemes and a dialogue of cultures, beliefs, and existential views that meet beyond barriers and separations. Thus, both Calvino and Winterson offer readers visions of possible worlds in which to test the self, along with images of transformation and fusion that enrich and expand our perception of ourselves and of the world we live in.

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29 Umberto Eco, *Opera aperta*, 2nd ed. (Milano: Bompiani, 1967), p. 44. My translation, M. A. S.



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# II CREATING SOCIAL IDENTITIES



“I’ve raked up my past so I can bury it”

## Body and Self in Two Female Jazz Autobiographies<sup>1</sup>

Publishing autobiographies of jazz, blues, and Broadway musical performers has, from day one, been a major instrument for them to assert their identity along the categories of gender, class, nationality, and certainly the performing arts. Some famous autobiographical statements concerning the author’s own birth or what the artists made public about their birth facts are powerful indications of their intention to shape their public selves. The most famous example was Louis Armstrong, who claimed that he had been born July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1900, on Independence Day, in the first year of the new century.<sup>2</sup> A baptismal certificate discovered in the eighties shows he was actually born on August 4<sup>th</sup>, 1901.<sup>3</sup> Of course, Armstrong managed to become the symbol he intended to be during his lifetime, signified by the adjustment of his birth date.

Another trumpet-playing jazz pioneer, a lesser-known contemporary of Armstrong, Arthur Briggs, was born in St. George, Grenada, in the Caribbean in 1899. Nevertheless, he kept telling everyone that he was from Charleston, South-Carolina, and that he had studied music at the Jenkins Orphanage, an early symbol of the African American music heritage there. Only posthumous research by Bergmeier and Lotz proved his autobiographical statements to be false. But he

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<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to express his thanks to Péter Pallai, Éva Federmayer, and Enikő Bollobás for their support and advice.

<sup>2</sup> Louis Armstrong, *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1954), p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Laurence Bergreen, *Louis Armstrong: An Extravagant Life* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), p. 14.

became what he had wanted to suggest: one of the truly outstanding and influential American pioneers of jazz in Europe.<sup>4</sup>

Singer and actress Ethel Waters starts her autobiography (first published in 1951) by saying that

I never was a child.

I never was coddled, or liked, or understood by my family.

I never felt I belonged.

I was always an outsider.

I was born out of wedlock, but that had nothing to do with all this. (1)<sup>5</sup>

As Waters' mother had been raped at the age of thirteen, Waters could have added to that confession right away that she had even been conceived in violence. Waters claims not to have been heavily influenced by the fact that she was born a "bastard," a word she repeatedly uses herself.<sup>6</sup> That is highly questionable, merely judging by her own account of her life, not to mention the inherent contradiction in the passage cited above.

Billie Holiday starts her autobiography (first published in 1956) by claiming "Mom and Pop were just a couple of kids when they got married. He was eighteen, she was sixteen, and I was three."<sup>7</sup> Actually, the numbers do not add up. Holiday's parents never got married in the first place. When she was born, her mother was barely nineteen, her father was barely seventeen, and they never lived under the same roof.<sup>8</sup>

Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues that to establish their selves, the predominant means for African Americans was "the shaping of a black self in words," that is, writing an autobiography. He goes on to say that the self is not only inaugurated by the performative act of writing and/or publishing a memoir, in most cases it involves

4 Horst P. J. Bergmeier and Rainer E. Lotz, "Southern Syncopated Orchestra, Pt. 2," *Black Music Research Journal* 30.1 (Spring 2010), 93-181.

5 All subsequent parenthesized references hereafter are to this edition: Ethel Waters and Charles Samuels, *His Eye is on the Sparrow: An Autobiography* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 1992).

6 "I knew I was bastard and what that meant" (11).

7 Billie Holiday and William Dufty, *Lady Sings the Blues* (London: Sphere Books, 1973), p. 5.

8 Robert O'Meally, *Lady Day: The Many Faces of Billie Holiday* (New York: Arcade, 1999), p. 67.

self-invention.<sup>9</sup> In an influential essay, Christopher Harlos established the significance of jazz among the performing arts in the context of autobiography: "Having expressed themselves for so many years in more subtle ways, jazz musicians typically have more in mind than merely setting the records straight when they turn to writing, and specifically to autobiography."<sup>10</sup> I am trying to approach the theory, the practice, and the identity politics of female African American performers of jazz and blues, applying in the context of new jazz studies an emphasized gender point of view.<sup>11</sup> Autobiographical practices have been widely discussed in the context of the female body, for instance by Sidonie Smith: "The subject of autobiography writes the history of the subjected and violated body."<sup>12</sup> Female African American jazz autobiographers have not yet been compared systematically along the lines of their narratives, although the autobiographical performances of jazz musicians have been in the focus of diverse studies for a few decades. A comparison of two groundbreaking black female autobiographies could be a good starting point. The two women whom I have already quoted, Ethel Waters (born

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- 9 Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Introduction," in *Bearing Witness: Selections from African-American Autobiography in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Pantheon, 1991), 3-9, p. 4.
- 10 Christopher Harlos, "Jazz Autobiography: Theory, Practice, Politics," in *Representing Jazz*, ed. Krin Gabbard (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 131-166, p. 137.
- 11 Out of the 40 autobiographies by blues and jazz artists listed in thematic collections for interested readers on *Amazon* in early 2015, only two are written by women, and the proportions are not more balanced on *Goodreads* either (3 out of 45), nor in similar lists compiled by active readers of other literary and bookselling websites. All four major blues and jazz autobiographies by women (all of them singers, only one of them singing at the piano: Ethel Waters, Billie Holiday, Anita O'Day, and Nina Simone) have been co-authored by white male ghost writers. To what extent the narrative of the creation of blues and jazz was monopolized by males is reflected by the subtitle (*The Story of Jazz as Told by the Men who Made it*) of the book considered widely as the collective autobiography of jazz itself (Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff, eds, *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya: The Story of Jazz as Told by the Men who Made it* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962)). The discourse is dominated by the narratives of the male instrumental players and singers of both sex, and mostly revolves around the assertion of jazz as a superior art form. In fact, it digested the memoirs of both Billie Holiday and Ethel Waters and further recollections by over half a dozen female performers (Lil Armstrong, Lena Horne, Alberta Hunter, Mary Ann McCall, Carmen McRae, Lizzie Miles, Anita O'Day, Mary Lou Williams). The discourse in this collection of texts also starts to assert the role of African American music in what was soon to become the civil rights movement. It makes a successful attempt to give insight into an influential subculture for the general reading public, but along gender terms it is highly problematic.
- 12 Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 127.



1896) and Billie Holiday (born 1915) are not quite of the same generation, but their books were published only five years apart.<sup>13</sup> Both reveal great insight into how the body of the female performing artist was trying to tear off shackles of race, social constraint, and sexual oppression. Interestingly, both have been co-authored by white male ghost writers.

I have compiled a chronological table of the publication of some autobiographies by major early jazz and blues artists, both male and female, in the order of their first autobiographical books published. They are all African Americans with one exception (O'Day). It shows quite a discrepancy in the publication dates of the first memoirs of first-generation performing artists (1936-1989), compared to the birthdates of these artists (1896-1919). I have excluded Simone from this comparison for being born later than the first generation and therefore addressing social and gender issues differently. Italics have been applied to names denoting people who were either men or not of African American background.

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13 In psychobiography, a method of comparing two or more life stories has been determined by Alan C. Elms as *multiple case psychobiography*. See Alan C. Elms, "Psychobiography and Case Study Methods," in *The Handbook of Research Methods in Personality Psychology*, eds R. W. Robbins, R. Ch. Fraleys, and R. F. Krueger (New York: The Guilford Press, 2007), 97-114. Many similarities and quite a lot of differences can be observed according to this method in the narratives of the autobiographical volumes by Waters and Holiday, whose lives have only superfluously crossed. Clarence Holiday, Billie's separated father, was a rhythm guitarist for Fletcher Henderson's Orchestra in 1930 and later, at a time when they recorded and performed with Waters. Holiday and Waters are almost a full generation, nineteen years, apart. Both of them were born out of wedlock, their grandmothers stepping in to raise them. Cousins were members of the immediate family, but lots of domestic violence and abuse was inflicted by them, including rape. Both of them lived temporarily in brothels while still minors. "I never knew a prostitute who did harm to anyone but herself," writes Waters (17), while Holiday says the same about herself as a drug addict, that she never hurt anyone but herself. Holiday appears to have been self-destructive, the victim type of personality, while Waters' ability for self-defense was strong and effective. Neither of them gave birth to children: Waters adopted a goddaughter, and Holiday had two godchildren whom she cared for. Both of them have been described by contemporaries during their lifetime to have quite openly conducted same-sex relations. Both of them built up unprecedented careers while being autodidactic as far as singing was concerned. Both of them had a wonderful ability to individualize the song material they chose to perform: "I hate straight singing. I have to change a tune to my own way of doing it. That's all I know" (145). "The whole meaning of my singing is feeling. Unless I feel something, I can't sing" (Holiday, quoted in the NPR radio documentary: *Billie Holiday: 'Lady Sings the Blues'*, prod. Elizabeth Blair (NPR, 2007).

Autobiographical Author	(Birth-Death)	Publication Year of First; Subsequent Autobiographical Books
<i>Louis Armstrong</i>	(1901-1974)	1936; 1954; 1971, 1999
<b>Ethel Waters</b>	(1896 -1977)	<b>1951</b> ; 1972
<b>Billie Holiday</b>	(1915-1958)	<b>1956</b>
<i>Hear Me Talkin' To Ya</i>	- - - - -	1962
Lena Horne	(1917-2010)	1965
Pearl Bailey	(1918-1990)	1968; 1971; 1989
<i>Duke Ellington</i>	(1899-1974)	1973
Josephine Baker	(1906-1975)	1976
<i>Anita O'Day</i>	(1919-2006)	1981
Nina Simone	(1933-2003)	1992

African American women's autobiography, as far as the performing arts are concerned, starts with Ethel Waters. She was the first to achieve a number of things in her professional career: the first black entertainer to move successfully from the vaudeville and nightclub circuits to what she called "the white time" – meaning both big time and white audiences – and from blues singer to Broadway and Hollywood dramatic actress, garnering, among others, an Academy Award nomination.<sup>14</sup> Waters also felt it necessary to treat the facts rather liberally when she wrote about her age: she also claimed to have been born in 1900, but her reasons seem to be different from those of Armstrong. She claims her friends had to sign a document making her four years younger to get a group insurance deal.

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14 As Ethel Waters' biographer, Donald Bogle points out that she was one of the first African American women to become a big star in both black and white vaudeville; the first jazz singer scatting on studio recordings from 1921, even preceding Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald; the first African American woman to appear on radio in 1922; the first African American woman to star on her own at the Palace Theatre in New York in 1925; one of the first African American women to sing in a movie, and the first to play a talking role in such a movie: *On With the Show*, 1929, she sang "Am I Blue," and so on until being the first African American woman to have her own network TV sitcom, *Beulah*, which went on the air in 1950. See Donald Bogle, *Heat Wave: The Life and Career of Ethel Waters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011); see also Donald Bogle, "Preface to the Da Capo Edition," in Ethel Waters and Charles Samuels, *His Eye is on the Sparrow: An Autobiography* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), v-xv.

She was born in 1896.<sup>15</sup> For many years, she was not using the surname Waters which was her father's. In those days, she went by the names of stepfathers and fiancés of her grandmother, who in fact raised her.<sup>16</sup>

"All my life I'd burned to tell the story of my mother's despair [...] and of Momweeze being hurt so by a world that then paid her no mind" (xi). The narrator follows two role models in becoming a grown-up woman: her grandmother, who brought her up; and to a lesser degree her real mother, Momweeze, who was still a child when she was born. The fact that her grandmother taught her gender roles is made very clear to the reader. It is also described how this influenced Waters's career. A particular role made Waters really famous on the dramatic stage in 1939 when she made her debut as a dramatic actress playing Hagar in DuBose Heyward's southern black classic *Mamba's Daughters: A Novel of Charleston*. Having read the novel before the play had even been written, she instinctively wanted to play Hagar, and then continued to decline many jobs just to be available for this role. "Hagar had held me spellbound" (219). "In Hagar was all my mother's shock, bewilderment, and insane rage at being hurt [...] But Hagar, fighting on in a world that had wounded her so deeply, was more than my mother to me. She was all Negro women lost and lonely in the White man's antagonistic world [...] I was no longer Ethel Waters [...] I had become Hagar" (245).

There are even more episodes showing how she followed in her grandmother's footsteps whom Waters' narrator always called "mom."<sup>17</sup> She first married at the age of thirteen, just like her grandmother. "His Eye is on the Sparrow" is a religious hymn that Waters sang at the deathbed of her grandmother and turned it into her trademark performance on stage and on screen, and later it also served as the title of her first autobiography. Another staple song of hers is "Supper Time," in which the lyrics reveal the cruelty of lynching in southern states. Judging by the narration, the Waters of *His Eye is on the Sparrow* was not a revolutionary as far as race issues were concerned; she was more of a talented negotiator achieving more than anyone else in a similar position before. The book also shows her as someone being able to capitalize on her personal experience in building up her film and stage persona: "As a dramatic actress all I've ever done is to remember.

15 A fact that even the LOC catalogue card on the inner front cover of the 1992 edition of her autobiography does not take notice of. Cf. Waters and Samuels, p. xiii.

16 Waters and Samuels, p. 39.

17 "I always called my grandmother Mom and felt so much closer to her" (20).

When I act I try to express the suffering – or the joy – I've known during my lifetime" (176). The narrator relates an exceptionally coherent *Bildungsroman* of how she managed to assert herself as an African American woman coming from a poor family, and tries to fit into this construct some of the events in her private life.

The way for the narrator to demonstrate that sort of assertion was showing how the protagonist was able to maintain her bodily integrity as a woman. Waters's protagonist resisted rape and resisted domestic violence when she was being beaten by her stepsisters. As a child she was trying to avoid trouble early on; she tried to resist and later she tried to step up against terror from her elders, white and black, to confront physical abuse by her employers and superiors. In the first eight chapters of the book, there are countless examples of the protagonist consciously separating herself from prostitutes, violent family members, deviant husbands and boyfriends, as well as from bullying bosses on the night club scene (see pages 29, 35, 73, etc.). The narrator claims that she kept herself away from substance abuse and alcohol. She narrates having committed the mistake of taking part in illegal joyrides by blacks in the cars of rich white people twice – something she came to regret soon, and tried to learn from the severe accident that ended the first such episode, as she almost lost a leg and could not work for many months. Though the narrator regrets what had happened, the reader can easily identify with the feelings expressed in this not quite innocent act of vengeance by African Americans on the property of their former slaveholders.

The narrator claims that the unique social and gender attitudes of the protagonist could have been triggered by having realized early on: "no protective instinct is evoked in anyone by such a huge girl" (64) as she was. She claims to have seldom depended on her voice "to win society recognition" (71). Chapters 3 and 4 relate the story of "Sweet Mama Stringbean," namely, that in her regular stage appearances she had to assume the identity of another, a corpulent elderly singer shown on the posters, but due to her talent and success, she was able to get rid of that soon and develop her own act (75). It might be viewed as the rejection of sexual stereotypes and preconceived sexual roles that while still a novice vaudeville performer and nightclub dancer, her stage dance, particularly the shimmy the way she did it, was non-erotic and surprisingly acceptable to the censors even when similar performances by others were restricted or banned. Due to childhood abuse, even rape she probably suffered in early childhood – "by the time I was seven I knew all about sex and life in the raw" (1) –, her experience might have contributed to

her ability to observe her own body from a conscious, almost external point of view, a phenomenon described by psychiatrists as dissociation. Similarly, in an episode of her private life in the vaudeville troop, when the *skeleton* and the *big fat baby boy* characters of their troop courted her at the same time, she accepted neither, and stayed in control of her own body. In the chapters on her adolescent years and early career on the vaudeville and night club circuit, the dissociation between the narrator and the protagonist is tangible for the reader.<sup>18</sup> The protagonist-narrator of *His Eye is on the Sparrow* emerges dignified as a true heroine through the succession of chapters describing the start of her *white time* career. Ethel Waters achieved an unprecedented social status by the early thirties, which she herself called “the dignity of the undefeated” (93). Waters was apparently sexually adventurous,<sup>19</sup> and she probably had same-sex partners on and off throughout her life. While Waters does not discuss same-sex relationships in her autobiography, the most recent biography by Bogle sets the issue right.

Ethel Waters, coming from the hardships that she had to endure, experienced phases of personal development that she is able to document in her autobiography. She surprised everyone in show business ever since she stepped on the vaudeville stage: “I was also an enigma. I was a kid yet my mind was so old and raw that neither the public nor my co-workers could figure me out” (130). An alternative persona to this one related by the narrator in the autobiography is the role of the slave girl, in the song “Am I Blue”: “I’m just a woman, a lonely woman / Waiting on the weary shore / I’m just a woman that’s only human / One you should be sorry for.”<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the narrator of *His Eye is on the Sparrow* gives a complete account of how the protagonist was able to assert herself in a number of identities: she was a fighter whenever necessary. Until the end of her mid-career, covered in

18 Examples of this kind of dissociation, in addition to numerous examples of the retrospective narration, include a sentence that is printed in brackets: “(Reverend Williams was a shrewd and knowledgeable man),” which precedes the self-reflective remarks on the next page closing the same topic, commenting on her youthful religious experience in retrospect (55). But Waters, the narrator, sometimes passes judgment on the behavior of the protagonist: “This will give [the reader] an idea of how much I still dreaded backstage contentiousness and professional jealousy” (134). In the closing paragraphs of Chapters 5 and 6, the dissociation of the narrator and the protagonist takes place in order to pass moral judgment on society and the protagonist.

19 “Now I never posed as a saint. [...] However I would have slept with a man for nothing if I liked him well enough,” concedes Waters about her younger self (79).

20 “Am I Blue” written by Harry Akst and Grant Clarke, a song she performed in clubs from the twenties onwards and she sang it in *On with the Show* on screen.

her first autobiographical book, Waters was able to break down barriers of race, social standing, and certainly of gender. The next phase in the autobiographical personality of Waters is the Hagar character – in which she was able to disclose the pains and the humiliation that her mother and African American women in general had to suffer, and she was highly successful doing that on stage and screen. The third phase took place following the publication of her autobiography, when she adopted her own goddaughter, and became a celebrated Hollywood actress in the film *The Member of the Wedding*. Ultimately, Waters became a devoted preacher and singer in the church led by the evangelist Billy Graham, documented in a new volume of autobiography published nineteen years after the first one.<sup>21</sup> The performative strategy of Ethel Waters reflects what Richard Poirier noted about the performative act of writing: "By performance I mean, in part, any self-discovering, self-watching, finally self-pleasuring response to the pressures and difficulties I've been describing. [...] a writer is most strongly engaged by what he is doing, as if struggling for his identity within the materials at hand."<sup>22</sup> As Daniel Stein underlines, Poirier defined "performance" as the opportunity for human beings to "release [...] energy into measured explorations of human potentialities," and made the distinction regarding "the multiple acts of performance" constituted by the performative text on the one hand and the public self created by the performances of the artist, on stage in our case. Stein concludes: "In that sense, the autobiographical text becomes, not unlike a musical recording, the *result* of a performing self that has been brought into existence by the energy, the drive of the musician/writer that compels him/her to create representations of self."<sup>23</sup> The interpretation of Ethel Waters's career provided by the narrator of *His Eye is on the Sparrow* performs the realization of the American Dream in show business: the assertion of a female African American artist breaking the social ice she used to be surrounded by.

The main narrative of Billie Holiday's autobiography is very disturbing, and her life story cries out for interpretations even half a century after her death. It is indeed the topic of almost one book a year on average every year since her

21 Ethel Waters and Charles Samuels, *To Me It's Wonderful: with an introduction by Eugenia Price and Joyce Blackburn* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

22 Richard Poirier, *The Performing Self: Compositions and Decompositions in the Languages of Contemporary Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. xiii. See also pp. 86-III.

23 Daniel Stein, "The Performance of Jazz Autobiography," *Genre* 36.2 (Summer 2004), 173-199, p. 182.

death.<sup>24</sup> The main motives for Holiday to publish her autobiography were to show repentance, catch her breath, and, of course, to get some extra cash so she could settle down a bit, as she was still deprived of her cabaret license – the permission to perform in New York City nightclubs selling alcohol – for having been in jail. The drug addiction of the narrator with all its consequences is laid bare quite frankly: “I’ve raked up my past so I can bury it.”<sup>25</sup> She also adds: “But I’m not crazy, I knew when I started to work on this book, that I couldn’t expect to tell the truth unless I was straight when it came out” (184). If the precocious girl built up as a stage persona of Ethel Waters was enigmatic, then the narrating position of Holiday’s book is quite a riddle for the reader to figure out: has the narrator been able to quit or has she not? To answer that question with a *no* is hardly possible, as long as the book the reader is holding in his or her hands exists. I am arguing that the main narrative is the effort to quit, but the reader can only share the hope of success in this respect. The book cannot and does not provide proof that Billie Holiday got rid of her addiction. This self-reflective narrative line is intertwined with a number of others, some of them as much an excuse for as a consequence of drug abuse.

The protagonist had to suffer a lot of abuse from her early childhood on: “I can’t possibly be hurt any more than I have been” (178). Holiday was born out of wedlock, became an abused child, and her father was almost never at home. The book relates the story of being raped at the age of ten, being convicted for prostitution while still underage, and being repeatedly abused as a woman but also repeatedly subordinating herself to men too, as she married three times. She wished for, the autobiography reveals, but she never had a child of her own. Just like Ethel Waters, as an African American singer Holiday broke down many social barriers and those of the entertainment world, and became an unmistakably recognizable

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24 For a near-complete annotated bibliography that includes French and German publications, too, see the official website of Billie Holiday.

25 All subsequent parenthesized references hereafter are to this edition: Billie Holiday and William Dufty, *Lady Sings the Blues* (London: Sphere Books, 1973).

voice.<sup>26</sup> She developed a totally unique style that puts her in the very top echelon of the most influential jazz singers according to the current critical consensus.

The book *Lady Sings the Blues* leaves many open questions and omits various details regarding her life story in general and the story of her addiction, while the reader does get intimate with various aspects of the protagonist's life: the narrator relates her various efforts to support and elevate the status of her relatives, taking the vacant position of head of family at a young age. Biographical research has proven what one can feel but not deduct with any certainty from the narrative that Holiday could never recover, and that alcohol abuse only added to her drug-related health and career problems. In the very last passages of the book, the narrator expresses her wish to recover from her habit because she has a loyal husband on her side *this time* (186-188). Regarding her own body, the narrator gives quite a lot of insight, much more than the details of her life story do due to the screening she needed related to her drug abuse: "a singer is not like a saxophone [...] A singer is only a voice, and a voice is completely dependent on the body God gave you. I'm supposed to go out there and look pretty and sing good and smile and I'd just better. Why? Because I'm Billie Holiday and I've been in trouble" (166). There is a perspective of her public self during her first tour of European countries that the narrator experienced as much more desirable than the way she had been perceived and written about in the States. "The stuff they wrote about me in Europe made me feel alive. Over here some damn body is always trying to embalm me" (176).

The social angle of the narration is primarily racial, along with motives for her stigmatization related to drugs. One of the points of harshest criticism by the narrator in *Lady Sings the Blues* is in the same chapter, about her revitalizing European tour in 1953: "That kind of thing would never happen to me in this country. If anybody ever met me at La Guardia Airport, I'd expect them to say, 'Send that bitch where you got her'" (169). Stigmatization and self-destruction are both possible interpretations of the famous gardenia hairpin episode, when she passed

26 Holiday was the first African American singer to be accompanied by the band of the (white) "King of Swing," Benny Goodman, at the age of eighteen, in 1933, in the studio and on the stage. She was the first to be invited to be the lead singer of the (white) Artie Shaw big band to undertake a concert tour of southern states in 1938. Her performance of the original song "Strange Fruit" at the Café Society, New York's first integrated nightclub, in 1939 was termed later as the first shot fired in the civil rights movement. She performed two sold-out shows at Carnegie Hall in 1956, as seats had to be put onto the stage.



out backstage during a make-or-break show (141). Termed yet again a comeback concert in 1956 in Carnegie Hall, Holiday, still lacking a cabaret card, was able to perform in front of a packed house. As a last preparation, she pinned a gardenia into her hair from the bouquet she had just been sent, as it had for long been her trademark prop. The narrator carefully avoids any kind of interpretation; a comment on her bodily senses substitutes describing emotions during the moment of the accident that happened in the intermission:

“I hadn’t noticed [...] I stuck it [the hairpin] deep into my head. I was so numb from excitement that I didn’t feel anything until the blood began running down my eyes and ears. [...] I’m trying to wash it out and [her accompanist] Bobby’s screaming, ‘Lady, you can’t go on, you must be dying.’ [...] Thank God I had on a black dress, so the blood didn’t show too bad. I mopped it up best I could and tried to fix my face. [...] By the time I was on thirty-third [song of the concert] I signalled Bobby to skip ‘Night and Day’, and by the time I started on ‘Strange Fruit’, between the sweat and blood, I was a mess. I made it backstage somehow. But when it came time to come out for the third curtain call I said ‘Bobby I just can’t make it no further’, and I passed out like a light.” (141)

The attitude of the narrator positioning the first-person protagonist as a victim makes self-reflection difficult, though many wounds suffered by the protagonist are described by the narrator. These include self-inflicted ones and abuse by others. Furthermore, the subject in the episode used her body – if accidentally – as a projection screen exactly the way Stallybrass and White defined it: “The body cannot be thought separately from the social formation, symbolic topography and the constitution of the subject. The body is neither a purely natural given nor is it merely a textual metaphor, it is a privileged operator for the transcoding of these other areas.”<sup>27</sup> Based on this definition, Smith argues that the stable identity of the body – in a female autobiographical context – is a cultural fabrication, and “autobiographical practice becomes one means to change. Writing her experiential history of the body, the autobiographical subject engages in a process of

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27 Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 192.

critical self-consciousness through which she comes to an awareness of the relationship of her specific body to the cultural 'body' and the body politic."<sup>28</sup>

The narrator of *Lady Sings the Blues* comments on the protagonist's drug abuse repeatedly as something that was inflicted on her by the Other rather than by herself. Drug abuse and physical abuse appear in the narration to have been handed down to her the same way, as if she had had no choice but to accept – a very obvious example of how the inscription of the body signifies the social and psychological constraints of the subject. Substance abuse might have altered the consciousness of the autobiographical subject, but it could not have saved her body from revealing her secrets. Nearing the present day in the narrative, the autobiography becomes more polemical and provides harsh criticism of the harm arising from the criminalization of drug use in the States, citing the good example of the UK and other European countries.

The aspect of embodiment immediately sheds light on the question of authorship. Both autobiographies have been co-authored by ghost writers. While Waters for *His Eyes on the Sparrow* employed a true journeyman of a ghost writer, Charles Samuels, Holiday needed to rely on confidentiality, which is why William Dufty, the husband of an old friend of hers, had been chosen. Ethel Waters's voice comes clearly through in the narration, while the *ghost* is not visible at all. Credibility is established by stylistic and poetic techniques, and through a couple of self-reflective remarks on writing the autobiography, the readers are assured that the ghost writer does not get in the way between narrator and reader. *New York Post* writer and editor Dufty, doubling for Billie Holiday, proved to be less skillful. Though he is able to relate the narrative in the style of Billie Holiday, at least that is what her contemporaries thought according to the son of Dufty, the narrative is not very skillfully shaped nor is it edited too well.<sup>29</sup> Dufty wrote the book hastily from a series of conversations in their apartment with the singer, but he heavily relied on various press interviews and reports to fill in the gaps in the life story, as researched by O'Meally and other biographers. Moreover, there is hardly any self-reflection by the narrator on writing, only remarks on the role of memory can be read.

<sup>28</sup> Smith, pp. 127-131.

<sup>29</sup> Jesse Hamlin, "Billie Holiday's bio, 'Lady Sings the Blues,' may be full of lies, but it gets at jazz great's core," (2006), *San Francisco Gate*, accessed 20 April 2015.

Though employing a ghost writer is not examined in his famous essay *On Autobiography*, going by the much-quoted definition of Philippe Lejeune the autobiographies of (not by) Ethel Waters and Billie Holiday should be discussed; what is more, they should not be called proper autobiographies. According to his definition, these two volumes would, at most, qualify as *homodiegetic biographies* – while all other conditions of the autobiographical pact still stand. It should be noted, though, that later writings of Lejeune (e.g., “The Autobiography of Those Who Do Not Write”) established the term *heterobiography* for collaborative or told-to life narratives, as the inverse of third-person autobiographies, where two narrators pretend to be one.<sup>30</sup>

Albert Stone, however, termed this kind of writing *collaborative autobiography*, based on Malcolm X’s book as an example, but he remarked that the role of the ghost writer is ambiguous, to say the least.<sup>31</sup> Stone, who also treats these ghost-written autobiographies as belonging in the intermediary zone between biography and autobiography, suggests that some insight could be gained as to where the body of the subject ends and where the shadow of the ghost stands by examining the paratexts of the books: the preface, the cover, promotional texts, etc. This is yet another aspect by which the very different memoirs of Ethel Waters and Billie Holiday can be put in the same category: the ghost writer is male, white, and has a social standing in the establishment of which the narrator-artist, in fact the African American woman performing artist, is seeking approval and recognition. This kind of unequal relation between the collaborators constitutes the type of ethnographic collaborative autobiography for Lejeune. Couser elaborates on his concept further as he underlines the different ethical issues arising: “Inequities of partnership are difficult to avoid in the ethnographic scenario, which is often shaped by colonial relationships, but they may occur in the celebrity scenario as well. There the relation (which is generally contractual) between subject and writer is effectively that between employer and employee, with all the potential for conflict that lies in such arrangements.”<sup>32</sup> Eakin, however, stresses the difference

30 Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, trans. Katherine Leary, ed. Paul John Eakin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 190.

31 Albert E. Stone, “Two Recreate One: The Act of Collaboration in Recent Black Autobiography,” (1982), qtd in Harlos, p. 146.

32 Thomas G. Couser, “Collaborative Autobiography,” *Academia.edu*, accessed 22 April 2015. See also his *Altered Egos: Authority in American Autobiography* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

between the ethnographic informant and a celebrity in their relation to a writer: the latter employs the writer, but not the informant.<sup>33</sup>

Blues, jazz, and gospel are African American art forms, but the first book ever written on jazz – eponymously titled and one which is also autobiographical to some extent – was published by Paul Whiteman, a white male from the middle-class and a commercially successful bandleader in the late twenties. Ghost writers are supposed to have a higher standing in the literary world than autobiographical authors, so they have been chosen by the publishers to be interpreters, intermediaries between the subculture and the mainstream, and advance guards of the narrators' campaigns. As I have argued, issues relating to the gender identity narrative of the volumes by Holiday and Waters are central for both subject-protagonists. However, the writing and editing by ghost writers is obviously a kind of filter, a kind of censorship. A look at the extremely complicated love relations of both narrators, not to mention the affairs they avoid to discuss, should be material enough to support this point. Furthermore, Billie Holiday is known for having used a compound expletive in every situation a lot, which begins with *mother* and continues with the letter *f*. Swearing so much would have evoked an effect contrary to the main purpose of publishing the Holiday book, and the work of the ghost writer in toning the language down could surely be detected here. Nevertheless, the same expletive has been printed in the famous/infamous autobiography of Miles Davis at about three hundred times on over four hundred pages.<sup>34</sup> More things have changed in the thirty years between the two publications than just the tolerance by the reading public of swearwords (said by women). Also, the nature of jazz performers' autobiographies has undergone a major shift; it has become more adequate in documenting the vernacular, the oral, and the immediate nature of the music and the people who perform it. Holiday's words seem to be reworked, simulated by her ghost writer occupying the position of the interviewer who, in turn, could become an eyewitness reporter any time. The language of the autobiography of Ethel Waters takes the discourse away from the original spoken source – the conversations with the ghost writer – and puts the narrator into a position as if she had been writing a journal since her birth and was reading or re-reading it. Thereby, the oral nature of Waters's narration is almost non-existent – excluding

33 Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 172.

34 Miles Davis and Quincy Troupe, *Miles: The Autobiography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989).

the dialogues. On the other hand, many details have been published exposing the distance between the ghost writer and Holiday as a narrator, for instance, the remark that she had disapproved of the title of her book, *Lady Sings the Blues*. Apparently, she found the category of being termed a blues singer too restrictive. It can be assumed that just as the idiosyncratic language and style have been lost in transcribing, editing, and publishing by white men who came from a literary culture, unlike the narrator of the book, gender and sexual conflicts and rough edges could also have been smoothed over for good.

Ethel Waters had been criticized by civil rights activists of later generations for accepting the role of the wise old black nanny who would never take a stand against her white employers. Her book is very coherent, and it reflects a deep Christian belief in God and a deep trust in ultimate social justice achieved by hard work over a lifetime, thereby subscribing to a middle-class puritan ideal, one that Ethel Waters did not necessarily follow in all phases of her life. The political stance of Ethel Waters, the Academy Award nominated actress is well served by the way her autobiography was presented stylistically – less of the vernacular and more of the standard American style than in the book of her younger colleague. Holiday is shown to be apologetic about her life, and falls back onto a confessional tone again and again. Waters presents herself as the winner of tough battles all her life. She seems to have been happy with her ghost writer because the other autobiographical volume she published employed the same one.

The contemporary readers of the first edition of *Lady Sings the Blues* would recognize a public figure from the tabloids – Holiday is in fact donning that very mask herself when she starts battling with the task of telling her narrative of abuse in the book relying on tabloid articles and interviews. A lot of discrepancies have been laid bare between the narrative and the hard facts of the biography. For O'Meally, the distance between the two is such that the narrator wears the mask of the public image of Billie Holiday.<sup>35</sup> If one carefully examined the gendered roles of the narration, the distance between the biography and the mask worn in the book would prove to be at least as big – her true private self is concealed, her love life and family life are exposed to some extent. The most striking example of that is the blind trust she puts in her then husband, who was in fact not an inch less abusive than her earlier, infamous partners. The autobiography

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35 O'Meally, p. 10.

ends in the lines: "But all that I'll soon forget with my man."<sup>36</sup> The narrator trusts her ability to stay clean in the near future, and reinforces this feeling by opening up after the full stop. Nevertheless, anyone familiar with the songs of Holiday cannot help but remember these lines:

"My man don't love me [...]  
He don't love me  
He beats me too  
Treats me awful mean."<sup>37</sup>

By the time Holiday published *Lady Sings the Blues*, this song, which she recorded twelve different times, has become unmistakably identifiable with her performance and public persona. Daniel Stein also goes as far as saying that this book is more a biography than an autobiography, only told from Holiday's perspective: "Whenever we speak of Holiday as the implied author and protagonist of *Lady Sings the Blues*, we are speaking of a textual construct influenced by Holiday herself but *controlled* by Dufty."<sup>38</sup> This is the sort of control which was so famously criticized by Angela Davis, who, from a radical feminist viewpoint, combated the view that Billie Holiday would have been masochistic. This was the common belief mainly presumed from the lyrics of the song quoted above and other public self-performances of Holiday. She claims to hear irony in the interpretation of this song and others by Holiday – something completely missing from the autobiography.<sup>39</sup>

Stein comments that Dufty the ghost writer is trying to add coherence, while Holiday changes masks and tries to stay elusive and flexible, so the authenticity

<sup>36</sup> Holiday and Dufty, p. 188.

<sup>37</sup> Holiday recorded this song 12 times under the title "Fine and Mellow," according to the most extensive online discography of hers (billieholiday.com), always changing the lyrics to some extent. No wonder she claimed ownership or was attributed as (one of the) author(s) of the lyrics and later even the music. But according to the reliable compilation jazzstandards.com, the song is originally called "My Man," and the music is by Maurice Yvain, lyrics by Jacques Charles, Channing Pollack, and Albert Willemetz.

<sup>38</sup> Stein, pp. 189-190.

<sup>39</sup> Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), pp. 178-179.

is decreased and the myth is increased.<sup>40</sup> Donald Clarke, a distinguished Holiday biographer, warned in a BBC documentary against being too patronizing with Holiday in seeing her as nothing but a tragic figure: “She made a lot of money and spent it all.” In the same documentary, the controversial jazz critic and ideologue Stanley Crouch can be seen making a funny face while saying “she had a great appetite for sensation.”<sup>41</sup> A recent biography by Griffin observes that her autobiography is not by Eleanora Fagan<sup>42</sup> nor Billie Holiday, but Lady Day, the strongest projection of her self, being the most elevated and the most feminine.<sup>43</sup> The biographer tried to strike a balance between some strongly opposing views on Holiday, to what extent she was a victim or to what extent she was getting an extra dose of the pleasures of life in every possible form that she could take, and arrives at the conclusion that she was, above all, a performing artist whose main goal was to make the songs she sang artistically her own.

Public image and self-assertion were perceived as being in harmony by contemporary readers of *His Eye Is on the Sparrow*, the performative goal of the collaborative autobiography to be in line with the public image of Waters. However, the legend that Billie Holiday tried to create is very complex, which is one of the reasons why she has such a lasting appeal. Messages of her autobiography, such as the performative act of Holiday and Dufty in publishing *Lady Sings The Blues*, could not quite catch up with the myth that Holiday herself created. It was a man’s task that no man could have fulfilled.

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<sup>40</sup> Stein, p. 192.

<sup>41</sup> *Billie Holiday: Sensational Lady*, dir. David F. Turnbull (*Reputations* series, BBC, 2001), YouTube, accessed 20 April 2015.

<sup>42</sup> The birth name of Billie Holiday.

<sup>43</sup> Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), p. 50.

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PAVIINA DOUBIEKOVA

## Notions of Motherhood in Contemporary Bulgarian Theatre

At the very end of 2012 and at the beginning of 2013, two brand new performances discussing notions of motherhood (*Medea – My Mother*<sup>1</sup> and *Mothers*<sup>2</sup>) appeared in Bulgaria. They are both based on newly written dramaturgy and specifically conducted interviews, and in this sense, they are both situated in the postdramatic theatre tradition, as defined by Hans-Thies Lehmann<sup>3</sup> in his influential work observing the development of contemporary theatre since the 1970s. The two productions are staged in two different theatres in the capital, Sofia, which inevitably acts as the country's theatrical and cultural epicenter due to many factors, among which the centralization of culture during state socialism and its legacy still play a vital role.

As it becomes visible even from the titles of the two performances, they both intend to discuss issues of motherhood directly, approaching them from different yet overlapping perspectives. What is more, both performances have attracted

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1 *Medea – My Mother*, Director: Ivan Dobchev and Margarita Mladenova; Author: Ivan Dobchev; Co-author: Stefan Ivanov; Stage and Costume Design: Daniela Oleg Liahova; Original Music: Assen Avramov; Cast: Margita Gosheva, Elena Dimitrova, Nevena Kaludova, Dimitar Nickolov, Boyko Krastanov, Antonio Dimitrievsky, Stanislav Ganchev, and Ivalylo Dragiev; Production: Theatre Laboratory Sfumato.

2 *Mothers*, Director: Neda Sokolovska; Choreography: Nikolina Todorova – Garage Collective; Set Design: Denitza Argiropulos; Assistant-director: Vilma Kartalska; With the participation of: Nevena Kaludova, Mila Bancheva, Lina Zlateva, Nadezhda Panayotova, and Liubomir Jelev; Production: Vox Populi Studio for Documentary Theatre.

3 Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

significant attention from audiences and theatre critics, resulting in theatre awards, nominations and invitations from national and international theatre festivals, as well as some harsh criticism. Having said that, in the context of Marshall McLuhan's famous statement claiming that "the medium is the message,"<sup>4</sup> these two productions – although different from one another in many ways that will be discussed later on in the paper – certainly *deliver* at least two important *messages*, especially when seen and understood in the overall framework of theatre and what is more, of the general social landscape of contemporary Bulgarian society. The first one is the subject matter selected – contemporary notions of motherhood questioned and addressed in a very straightforward manner, and the second one is the medium chosen to approach it – the theatre stage and the means of not just any type of theatre-making but precisely those of documentary theatre.

*Medea – My Mother* is a production of Theatre Laboratory Sfumato – an artistic formation highly-recognized both locally and internationally, founded in 1989, at the end of state socialism by theatre directors Margarita Mladenova and Ivan Dobchev. Their work, which consistently struggles to stay out of the scope of mainstream theatre and works in the frames of laboratory theatre as established and developed by key figures such as Jerzy Grotowski<sup>5</sup> and Anatoly Vasiliev,<sup>6</sup> is well-known for its quest for profoundness and emotionally and intellectually moving theatrical experiences. In this sense, Theatre Laboratory Sfumato is an alternative yet influential voice on the local scene. The production of *Medea – My*

4 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Mentor, 1964), pp. 1-2.

5 Jerzy Grotowski founded his widely acclaimed theatre company in Opole, South West Poland in 1959, and after moving it to Wrocław in 1965, he renamed it Theatre Laboratory. It became well-known all around the world in 1968 after its participation at the Edinburgh Festival. The same year, his seminal book, *Towards A Poor Theatre*, co-authored by the theatre critic Ludwik Flaszen, appeared, summarizing and further developing the principles of his laboratory theatre-making. In an article on Grotowski, which later became the preface of the English edition of the book, Peter Brook, another key figure of contemporary theatre, describes Grotowski's work as follows: "He calls his theatre a laboratory. It is. It is a centre of research. It is perhaps the only avant-garde theatre whose poverty is not a drawback, where shortage of money is not an excuse for inadequate means which automatically undermine the experiments. In Grotowski's theatre as in all true laboratories the experiments are scientifically valid because the essential conditions are observed. In his theatre, there is absolute concentration by a small group, and unlimited time." Peter Brook, "Preface," in *Towards a Poor Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 11-14, p. 11.

6 Another key theatre director of the experimental laboratory theatre of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, founder of the School of Dramatic Art in Moscow in 1987.

*Mother* itself is staged by the two co-founders of Sfumato, Margarita Mladenova and Ivan Dobchev, with eight actors, most of whom they work with on a regular basis. The text is co-written by Ivan Dobchev and a younger but already established Bulgarian poet and writer, Stefan Ivanov.

*Medea – My Mother* tells the semi-fictional story of an expat called “The Protagonist,” who is on his way to Bulgaria in order to find his lost roots and his mother, who had given birth to him somewhere there and had left him as a child. During the opening scene, the audience encounters him unconscious, fighting for his life, and receiving blood transfusion after his private plane, symbolizing his high material status, crashes somewhere in the remote, poor suburbs of the country. Being in this condition, most of the action on stage appears to be his dreams, nightmares, illusions, and projections – everything that the subconscious releases when the conscious is not there to censor it in the Freudian sense. Furthermore, his alter ego is also present and personified on stage in order to voice all of his hidden desires and thoughts. The Protagonist’s blood donors are local, predominantly Roma people, signified as such by their clothes, dialect, and overall attitude, and what gets into the traveler’s veins together with their blood is their personal stories.

Most of those stories are based on real-life interviews conducted with people or gathered from local media and court transcripts, telling episodes of growing up in orphanages or under difficult social conditions. Having this material as a dramaturgic background, the audience is exposed to an accumulating amount of narratives by people who had to grow up without mothers in harsh environments where all kinds of harassment and brutality were daily routine. Furthermore, most of them have children of their own by the time the Protagonist receives their blood. But from their stories and attitudes, it emerges that they have become parents mainly due to the overall poor social conditions and lack of knowledge on contraception, along with the lack of expectations and the inertia of *this is how it goes*. The personal will and awareness behind parenthood remain missing from this generation as well.

One of the most often-repeated phrases which inevitably sticks into the viewers’ mind and gives a key to the general understanding of the performance is the phrase “fuck the mother!”, sung repeatedly and loudly on the stage. It undoubtedly underlines the general attitude and anger towards the fact that something huge, much bigger than the individuals, is missing, and the performance claims

that it is the figure of the mother as a person and, more importantly, as a metaphor. Furthermore, even when she is there, she is more than willing to sacrifice her children in her own anger and fury, as Medea did in Euripides's tragedy.

Also, the dramaturgical texture of the performance is openly influenced by ideas and visions of the Bulgarian-born Nobel laureate, Elias Canetti. Statements from the first volume of his autobiography *The Tongue Set Free*, describing and analyzing his early childhood memories, are often quoted.<sup>7</sup> What is more, the play – though not stated explicitly – bears an obvious resemblance to the works and to some extent to the biography of another Bulgarian-born influential intellectual of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Julia Kristeva. Firstly, Kristeva's life-long theorization of motherhood and its relation to femininity come to mind. The characters of the performance can be seen as situated or even as caught up in a very fragile pre-symbolic moment which threatens to go on forever. Unconsciously, they need to abject themselves from the Mother, to leave the *chora*. Yet, the missing link with it, due to in a way missing *chora* itself in this context, means that they have never actually had the chance of living through this stage of psychological development. As a result, it becomes impossible to move on in any direction.

What is more, when the performance is looked at through the lenses of its authors' intentions, especially in relation to current Bulgarian society, Kristeva's essay "Stabat Mater"<sup>8</sup> comes to mind. In this essay, the author systematically and profoundly elaborates on the development of the image of the Virgin Mary in Christianity and its role in constructing not only the mother-son relation in Western imagery, but, as Kristeva puts it, "[f]inally, the relationship to Mary and of Mary was revealed as the prototype of the love relationship; it consequently followed the development of those two fundamental subcategories of Western love, courtly love and love of the child, and thus became involved in the whole range of love-types from sublimation to asceticism and masochism."<sup>9</sup> Although Kristeva's text focuses predominantly on the Western context, it often refers to the Eastern Orthodox tradition, part of which, of course, is Bulgaria. Bearing in mind the uneasy relationship of religion and state socialism, we can still claim that the Orthodox and, generally speaking, the religious notion of the figure of

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7 Elias Canetti, *The Tongue Set Free: Remembrance of a European Childhood*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (London: Granta Publications, 2011).

8 Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," trans. Arthur Goldhammer, *Poetics Today* 6.1/2 (1985), 133-152.

9 Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," p. 136.

the mother as being modest, caring, altruistic, ready to sacrifice in the name of something bigger, and clean in terms of almost lacking sexuality and indeed sexual desire<sup>10</sup> is still very powerful and remains generally unquestioned in the local context. As a matter of fact, though it is not openly stated in the performance, it can easily be guessed that it is exactly this notion of motherhood that is eventually implied by the authors' quest for the "sacred value of motherhood"<sup>11</sup> in their own words, understood in religious terms, as an alternative to the of image of Medea.

Additionally, the point of view of the expat, returning to the homeland after a long absence, is another key issue for contemporary Bulgarian society,<sup>12</sup> and again bears resemblance to another famous essay by Kristeva, "Bulgaria, My Suffering,"<sup>13</sup> from several perspectives. For the purposes of this paper, probably the most important one is tightly related to the notion of the homeland as motherland or as a *chora* from which the subject needs to emancipate in order to grow and develop. What is more, what determines the homeland as a longed-for motherland in the performance is the mother tongue that Kristeva declares to have overcome in favor of the French language because of its insufficiency, dirtiness, and limitations.<sup>14</sup>

Kristeva's essay, written after her return to the country in 1989 as a member of the then French President François Mitterrand's official delegation, also casts light on the specificities of the position of the exile, who is looking at a once familiar but by now somehow lost context. It is striking that what Kristeva saw and described – uncleanness and savagery, especially when in juxtaposition to French civilization<sup>15</sup> – is also valid for the perspective of the performance *Medea – My Mother* towards its own reality. The local situation presented is the reality of poor, uneducated people, whose daily lives are dedicated entirely to physical survival, and all their actions are driven and regulated by primitive impulses. This

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<sup>10</sup> Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," pp. 137-138.

<sup>11</sup> "Medea – My Mother," *NETA International Theatre Festival, I. L. Carigiale National Theatre of Bucharest*, accessed 13 February 2016.

<sup>12</sup> According to the latest data of The National Statistical Institute, Bulgaria's population living in the country before and on December 31st, 2013 was 7 245 677. According to other sources, it is estimated that nearly 3 000 000 Bulgarians live abroad.

<sup>13</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Bulgaria, My Suffering," in *Crisis of the European Subject*, (New York: Other press, 2000), 122-131.

<sup>14</sup> Kristeva, "Bulgaria, My Suffering," pp. 125-127.

<sup>15</sup> Kristeva, "Bulgaria, My Suffering," pp. 122-127.



self-representation of the local context in the performance inevitably opens up space for comments in the direction of the important scholarly debate on “imagining the Balkans,”<sup>16</sup> as seen from the outside and through Western eyes, and also of the concept of “self-colonization,” defined by Alexander Kiossev as follows: “The concept of self-colonizing can be used for cultures having succumbed to the cultural power of Europe and the west without having been invaded and turned into colonies in actual fact.”<sup>17</sup> In this regard, the question arises whether this is the only possible point of view towards the everyday life of poor people in contemporary Bulgaria or whether this is just the deeply rooted inertia of representing it, inevitably omitting major parts of the picture. This is a huge topic on its own, and for the purposes of this paper, it is enough to note that in the representation of Bulgarian reality and notions of motherhood in *Medea – My Mother* it is possible to trace such a layer and ambiguity in the authors’ intentions and tone.

The second performance, *Mothers*, had its premiere three months after *Medea – My Mother*. It is the third production of the newly-founded Vox Populi Studio for Documentary Theatre, which bases its practices entirely on creating verbatim theatre – a very particular form of documentary theatre-making that developed in the late 80s and 90s and soon gained momentum worldwide. Yet, in the Bulgarian theatre context, it appeared much later, and as a matter of fact, Vox Populi is among the first and definitely the most influential artistic groups to introduce and inaugurate this form of theatre-making in the country. Most of their performances appear in The Red House Center for Culture and Debate – an independent artistic and educational space that has been in existence for more than ten years now and has already developed its particular audience and sphere of influence. Again, as Sfumato Theatre, it stays in a position of alternative cultural stage in comparison to popular mainstream theatre, but retains a strong, distinguishable voice.

The performance itself is directed by Neda Sokolovska, one of the co-founders of Vox Populi, who works with four actresses, all of whom are mothers themselves, this being among the criteria for their selection. They were involved in the process of the performance’s preparation as early as being asked to conduct some of the interviews needed for the production. As a verbatim theatre performance, *Mothers*

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16 One of the major studies on the topic is Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

17 Alexander Kiossev, “The Self-Colonizing Metaphor,” *Atlas of Transformation, Monument to Transformation*, accessed 13 February 2016.

is entirely based on real-life interviews. What is more, they are not edited, there is no transcript and prewritten text, the actors listen to the interviews on stage on mp3 players in their ears and articulate them in real time. The stories told in this performance are entirely from women's perspectives and focus mainly on the experience of becoming a mother: the act of giving birth, the healthcare system in the country and its problems, the experience of losing a baby, the difficulties of taking care of an infant, and so on. Again, Roma issues are touched upon as well, though the predominant standpoint is of a middle-class, white Bulgarian woman.

If it is to be summarized in a nutshell, the overall tone of this performance is stretched between the poles of fascination for motherhood as shown in the rhetoric of it being the best thing that can happen to a woman and the very bodily and emotional experiences that go with it, including pain, fear, and excitement – all of which are accessible only to women in this particular form and are rarely discussed publicly when issues of motherhood are mentioned. The disappointment that this glossed-over part of motherhood brings can also be read along the lines of the performance, and the production somehow senses that there are both omitted and overrated notions in the current way of thinking about motherhood, yet it fails to identify them and to offer another perspective. Or, as the company describes the performance on their Facebook page: “Four established actresses, each of whom has recently become a mother, present the stories of other mothers, women who have experienced the mystery of giving birth, the great metamorphosis that is motherhood. In these stories we are looking for the authenticity, humour, awe and sublimity of the experience. But above all, *Mothers* is a verbatim performance in which four actresses are the exponents of the real life experience of other women. The means of verbatim theatre allow this experience to be truly represented so that spectators will have not only their dose of evening fun, but also a priceless empirical insight into the sublime advent of human life.”<sup>18</sup> This, in a way, is a paradox because though claiming that “the real life experience of motherhood” is different than the imagery that goes with it, *Mothers* actually represents on stage uncritically all socially constructed clichés about the joys of motherhood, such as it being the ultimate realization of the femininity of women.

Given their simultaneous appearance, their subject, and their attempt at approaching it, it is only natural that the two performances should be compared

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<sup>18</sup> *Mothers*, Vox Populi Studio for Documentary Theatre, Facebook event, accessed 13 February 2016.

and contrasted with each other along several lines. What is more, together they need to be discussed in the context of the general theatre situation and level of debate on motherhood in Bulgarian society. Getting into the first task, to begin with, it can be underlined that they are both made by renowned but somewhat alternative to the mainstream theatre companies with established, unique voices. This position can be very fruitful for introducing sensitive topics into social debate, and as a matter of fact, social involvement is indeed expected from these people and theatre groups. In contemporary theatre, it is quite often the case that the alternative scene is the one struggling to employ and develop “theatre as a moral institute,” as Schiller’s “Theater Considered as A Moral Institution” declares in 1784,<sup>19</sup> overtaking the functions and responsibilities of decaying institutions and authorities in society. In that regard, the sudden urge of two different theatre companies to open up debate on motherhood in the Bulgarian context at this very moment is quite telling in itself.

Second of all, they both – though to a different extent – bring real-life stories to stage, developing them from scratch by firstly gathering material, making a selection as to what to include, and then transforming it into a full-length performance in order to present the state of art on the subject matter. This need, on the one hand, emphasizes the urgency and the necessity of the debate. On the other hand, however, it also shows the confusion, the lack of critical distance and clearer terms, which would allow for a more metaphorical artistic approach, for instance, using already existing plays or retelling on stage those stories in a more abstract way, rather than the blunt, direct approach used.

Third of all, both productions, at the same time consciously and unconsciously, show how the role of the mother is very much dependent on and inscribed into the social sphere, determined by it and narrowed down to a list of particular expectations. The traditional and dominant notion of motherhood as women’s ultimate longing and the realization of femininity – socially constructed and slightly modified through time, as argued by Julia Kristeva and other scholars – remains very powerful and influential in the Bulgarian context. What is more, it is worth mentioning that both performances introduce the topic of Roma people and mothers from a Roma background, which is also another generally omitted topic in Bulgarian theatre, and the first steps towards any kind of change are very

19 Friedrich Schiller, “Theater Considered as A Moral Institution,” *The Schiller Institute*, accessed 13 February 2016.

recent. Yet again, even though the inclusion of this topic is very crucial, unfortunately, its representation in both cases mostly reproduces the general stereotypes on the issue – high birthrates among the Roma population, lack of education and responsibility, etc. *Medea – My Mother* might be seen as taking a step forward by trying to exemplify that this situation is a result of larger processes, a bigger frame in which the individuals are caught up, and breaking out of it on one's own seems almost impossible.

As a matter of fact, one such thing strikingly and symptomatically omitted from both productions is any discussion of men, manhood, and fatherhood as parts of the construction of motherhood. In both cases, the focus falls entirely on the figure of the mother; all social and emotional expectations and disappointments are related to it. This shows, on the one hand, that children's upbringing and the private sphere in general remain perceived predominantly as female domains and responsibilities. Furthermore, it also raises important questions prominent for the discussion of notions of motherhood. One such major research question that needs to be discussed separately in another paper would be: what has happened to notions of masculinity and the father's figure both on a personal and a social level?<sup>20</sup>

Another perspective which would be useful when discussing the two performances is the historical one. Both notions of motherhood and the relationship between arts and their modes of representing social reality are largely influenced by state socialism and its legacy in Bulgaria. When it comes to tracing the dominant notion of motherhood in society since the end of state socialism, even though slight modifications might be registered, it still remains stable and clear in its requirements: women, in order to fulfill their feminine duties, must give birth, take care of the upbringing of the children and the domestic sphere, and, at the same time, be actively involved in the labor market. This vision somehow appears to be alive and striving, probably because in the period after 1989, no better dominant notion of hegemonic motherhood has been produced. What is more, the

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20 Julia Kristeva's observations on fatherhood could be one possible entry point: "I'll argue that the father complex is a *universal* which is nevertheless modulated very *differently* through the history of different civilizations and religions; and today, when confronted with the new methods of procreation mentioned by Eric Laurent, we need to take into consideration these different varieties of father complexes and the different kinds of dead fathers." Julia Kristeva, "A Father is Beaten to Death," *Julia Kristeva Website*, accessed 13 February 2016.

two performances actually partially problematize the situation in which there is a lack of clear definition, the figure of the mother is acutely missing in society, and thus mothers' own self-perceptions and needs are not discussed either.

When it comes to the usage of documentary in theatre, these two performances fall into the general trend of theatres that have returned to this practice in the last couple of years. This can be read as a difficult return, again due to state socialism. As it is largely known, the leading ideological aesthetics, tightly related to the politics of the regime, was the so-called *socialist realism*. It is interesting to note that throughout the socialist block, the work of art pointed out as exemplary for the establishment of social realism's doctrine was Maxim Gorky's novel *Mother*.<sup>21</sup>

Its basic requirement was declared to be the representation of socialist reality as it is, which, however, automatically translates into illustrating the happy new life of the proletariat. Yet, socialist realism's implementation was regulated on many levels and through a refined machinery of censorship and self-censorship. Furthermore, the expectation of representing reality as it is in state socialistic terms often meant to represent it only as positive and looking forward to a bright future, which is a paradox within itself, making it impossible in a way. What is more, during this period, theatre was largely used for propaganda purposes due to its easy and large outreach. Because of that, theatres were under close scrutiny from the State on many levels: from repertoire through modes of acting, education of future professionals, directing, etc. The visible contradiction between the state-required form of theatre-making during state socialism resulted in a long period of keeping distance from representing documentary and real-life facts and situations in theatre after 1989.

Last but not least, when looked through the lenses of the broad contemporary theatre culture in the country, where theatre is often considered either as pure entertainment, a TV-show seen live, or as elite art requiring the attitude of respect and distance, both the approach and the topic of the two performances remain off the beaten tracks. The monthly programs of theatres in Sofia, for instance, which are mostly run by the State or the Municipality, are visibly dominated by productions, based on established, recognizable names in theatre

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21 Published in 1906, the novel tells the story of a female factory worker, who lives under harsh social and family conditions and who helps her son, involved in revolutionary activities. See Maxim Gorky, *Mother* (Mumbai: Jaico Publishing House, 2002).

dramaturgy. This is another reason why *Medea – My Mother* and *Mothers* stand out in their context and seem to offer a good possibility for opening up new spaces for debate on motherhood.

The close appearance of the two performances on Bulgarian stages delivers several important *messages* if McLuhan's rhetoric is to be used again. Some of them are openly stated in the two productions, and others become visible when their authors' intentions and own stereotypes are scrutinized. The major one, of course, is the urgent need to open up a discussion on motherhood and to redefine the possible roles mothers can have in a society as well as their presence as key metaphorical figures. However, when doing both, it remains crucial not to fall into the easy inertia of repeating deeply-rooted clichés but instead to use the opportunity for including overshadowed experiences and meanings of motherhood and femininity. This is not an easy task on its own. That is the reason why this paper, on the one hand, tries to give all the necessary credit and attention to the appearances of these two important theatrical voices and the innovation they bring. On the other hand, however, it also attempts to remain cautious of some of the sources of those notions of motherhood in the Bulgarian context and to pay attention to their presence in the two performances.

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KATA GYURIS

“A different kind of freedom”<sup>1</sup>

## Female Bildung in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* and Calixthe Beyala’s *La négresse rousse*

In one of her renowned and often cited TED talks, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie discusses “how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children,”<sup>2</sup> and especially – she adds – if we are led to believe that the story we are being told is one of its kind, the only truth there exists and by which we should abide. To combat this vulnerability of ours, Adichie has laboured in her writings to create an authentic female African voice both in her native Nigeria and its wider diasporic communities. Perhaps the most striking example of this endeavour is her novel *Purple Hibiscus*, a coming-of-age story, originally published in 2003.

Many critics agree that *Purple Hibiscus* is not only reminiscent of an earlier African feminist novel, the Zimbabwean Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* (1988), but that it also borrows the same structural opposition of the national

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1 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* (London: Fourth Estate, 2013), p. 16. I wish to extend my thanks to Dr Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi for her insightful remarks in articulating the main thesis as well as some of the finer points of this paper.

2 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story,” *TED*, accessed 25 August 2016. Adichie has another, equally notable, TED talk, “We Should All Be Feminists,” which was published in a book format in 2014 (*We Should All be Feminists* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014)). Its significance as a newer addition to the feminist discourse is perhaps marked by the fact that as of 2015, every 16-year-old in Sweden is being given a hard copy of the essay (Alison Flood, “Every 16-year-old in Sweden to Receive Copy of *We Should All Be Feminists*,” *The Guardian*, 4 December 2015, accessed 25 August 2016).

and the familial.<sup>3</sup> In both works, the traditional African homestead and family life are juxtaposed to Westernised models of living, both attempting to present themselves as single stories to be followed unquestioningly by the budding female protagonists. Both Adichie and Dangarembga exhibit tyrannical father figures in order to expose the cultural and historical oppression of colonisation that eventually results in the native's nervous condition – a phrase famously coined by Jean-Paul Sartre in his preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*<sup>4</sup> and subsequently borrowed by Dangarembga.

*Nervous Conditions* seems to offer itself easily as a model for Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, and indeed, numerous studies have been written on this subject, particularly about the intertextuality of the novels and their female characters. For this reason, instead of perpetuating this long line of studies, I propose to compare and contrast another, lesser known, work of African fiction with Adichie's novel. Cameroonian Calixthe Beyala's *La négresse rousse* (*The Red Negress*), published in 1997 as a reedition of a novel that was originally published in 1990 under a different title (*Seul le Diable le Savait* – *Only the Devil Knew*), chronicles the life and adventures of Mégri, a young African girl living in the backward village of Wuel as a social outcast along with her mother and two fathers. Interestingly, while Beyala is one of the best-known and critically acclaimed Francophone female novelists, this particular book has received little critical attention. A possible cause of this critical oversight might be that the work seems to be a “novel of transition” within Beyala's oeuvre, mediating between her novels set in Africa and her novels set in Europe, as well as between the angry novels of the 1980s and her more nuanced later works.<sup>5</sup>

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3 Susan Z. Andrade, “Adichie's Genealogies: National and Feminine Novels,” *Research in African Literatures* 42.2 (2011), 91–101, p. 96, and Anna-Leena Toivanen, “Daddy's Girls?: Father-Daughter Relations and the Failures of the Postcolonial Nation-State in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Véronique Tadjo's *Loin de mon père*,” *ariel: Review of International English Literature* 44.1 (2013), 99–126, p. 106.

4 Jean-Paul Sartre, “Preface,” in Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 7–31, p. 20. In a later translation, Richard Philcox changes Farrington's “nervous condition” to “neurosis,” which is, in fact, a direct translation of Sartre's original “névrose.”

5 Nicki Hitchcott, *Calixthe Beyala: Performances of Migration* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), p. 10.

The theme, however, is strikingly similar to that of Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. Mégri, who is curtailed by the traditional culture of her African village that allocates no meaningful place to women, is forced to find her own purpose in life, and consequently, to learn to voice her desire for that new purpose. As such, both novels serve as beautifully written testimonies of not only the coming of age of the two female protagonists but also of the burgeoning of a new idea that Adichie is happy to call feminism.<sup>6</sup> Beyala, on the other hand, chooses to move away from what she conceives of as an essentially Western concept and in *Lettre d'une Africaine à ses sœurs occidentales* (*An African Woman's Letter to Her Western Sisters*, 1995), she establishes her own credo: *féminitude*, a mixture of *négritude* and feminism, with a focus on the difference-equality between men and women rather than equality between sexes.<sup>7</sup> With this, she hopes to blend traditional notions of African womanhood and a strong advocacy for women's rights, claiming that these two are not in contradiction to each other, rather, they can and should be reconciled.

Instead of engaging with the authors' feminist theorisations I propose to look at how Adichie's and Beyala's commitments manifest in their fiction, that is, how they negotiate female identity in the face of two predominantly patriarchal cultures where the woman (especially the woman of colour) is always forced to the margins of society. In both novels, the old trope of *Bildung* is explored and reworked, with a focus on the notion of female and male spaces as well as women's ability to transgress the boundaries circumscribing these spaces and to find safe locations within their liminal positions by establishing a voice for themselves. I will finally argue that the various liminal spaces described in Adichie's and Beyala's novels represent the individual stepping-stones on the characters' journeys towards selfhood and towards understanding African womanhood.

In his concise yet comprehensive study of the *Bildungsroman*, Tobias Boes argues that with the rise of feminist and postcolonial studies the genre itself expanded, moving further away from its original connotations.<sup>8</sup> According to him, the term *Bildungsroman* can be used as an umbrella term, and as such, it loses its original German cultural connotation and becomes a broad and, what

6 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "We Should All Be Feminists," *TED*, accessed 10 September 2016.

7 Hitchcott, pp. 12; 26.

8 Tobias Boes, "Modernist Studies and the *Bildungsroman*: A Historical Survey of Critical Trends," *Literature Compass* 3.2 (2006), 230-243, p. 231.

is more, global, literary genre in which local specificities are to be treated as simple variations on a theme.<sup>9</sup> Thus, when one identifies an African novel as a story of development, that is, a Bildungsroman, one must also bear in mind its notable differences from the European variety of the genre, such as its attention to history and politics alongside personal development, as Ralph A. Austen notes,<sup>10</sup> or its poignantly little emphasis on individualism and introspection.<sup>11</sup> Austen further argues that these differences are merely elements in forming “a subjectivity more appropriate to colonial/postcolonial conditions,”<sup>12</sup> especially when one considers the unique combination of the African tradition of collectivity and the Western-based, growing notion of individuality, including women’s long overdue gaining of power and agency.

In a similar vein, to give an intertextual reading of these two novels is not to claim that they merely reappropriate the Western tradition. Rather, they make use of what has come to be known in literary studies as Bildung in the widest possible sense, focusing on non-institutionalised forms of education and development. Moreover, *Purple Hibiscus* and *La négresse rousse* both make the concept of Bildung their own in order to problematise the single story of Africa that has been presented to African and Western audiences alike.

Ouma remarks how Kambili’s development in *Purple Hibiscus* is constantly informed by spaces and the different identity politics each space demands of its inhabitants.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps one of the most significant structural and thematic divisions in both novels lies between male and female spaces. The protagonists initially live in societal and familial bounds determined by the men in their lives, which is distinctly visible in the way these men organise spaces around themselves and their families. For instance, the family home in *Purple Hibiscus* is very un-African in the sense that it is spacious and its owner makes great effort at presenting it as grandiose yet lacking in personality as much as possible:

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9 Boes, p. 242.

10 Ralph A. Austen, “Struggling with the African Bildungsroman,” *Research in African Literatures* 46.3 (2015), 214–231, p. 215.

11 Austen, p. 216.

12 Austen, p. 216.

13 Christopher E. W. Ouma, “Childhood(s) in *Purple Hibiscus*,” *English Academy Review* 26.2 (2009), 48–59, p. 52.

The silence was broken only by the whirl of the ceiling fan as it sliced through the still air. Although our spacious dining room gave way to an even wider living room, I felt suffocated. The offwhite walls with the framed photos of Grandfather were narrowing, bearing down on me. Even the glass dining table was moving toward me.<sup>14</sup>

Interestingly, the neutral elegance and the seemingly large white walls along with the looming ceiling fan are precisely the things that curtail the existence of the inhabitants of the house, except, of course, for Eugene, the iron-fisted patriarch. Kambili's experience of and reaction to this strangely narrowing space is a nervous condition, akin to the way Dangarembga's protagonists are struggling with the suffocating reality of being on the border of two worlds, not quite accepted by either.

The father figure, who maintains this neatly trimmed existence, is described as being "too much of a colonial product,"<sup>15</sup> and it is partially through him that the juxtaposition between the national and the familial is most obvious. Papa, as Kambili and her brother address him, proudly takes on the public image of the self-righteous freedom fighter, the modern Nigerian man who will stand up for freedom of thought and expression. Andrade remarks that, in this sense, he is very different from the abusive, overzealous Catholic "family monster"<sup>16</sup> his wife and children know him to be. The silence that reigns in Papa's household imposed by his rules and restraints is the same silence that dominates colonial Nigeria, rendering Kambili's own lack of voice a doubly painful realisation for the reader.

At first glance, the familial realm in *La négresse rousse* appears to be the complete opposite of the Achike home. The motley crew (Mégri; her mother, Bertha [Dame maman]; and her two fathers, Papa Pygmée and Papa Bon Blanc) living in their cottage in the village of Wuel all seem to follow Dame maman's lead. She may be an outcast in the village for the dubious paternity of her daughter and her general bad reputation, but at home she appears to be mistress of all. However, if we take a closer look at the description of the family home, we might be able to detect some subtleties within this seemingly female space that may inform us otherwise:

<sup>14</sup> Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> Andrade, p. 96.

Dame maman's room was twice as big as mine. Ochre-coloured smoke was billowing from a small torch. To the right, a chest of drawers stood, skillfully made from six cases of beer. [...] As for the rest, the room looked like a giant attic where old papers and pieces of cotton having escaped from the disembowelled mattress, as well as empty talc boxes and soap wrappings, were haphazardly thrown around.<sup>17</sup>

The room appears vast, allowing its inhabitants free movement, unlike the vastness of Eugene's house, where the sheer size of the space acts as a suffocating presence. Still, if we pay attention to the carelessness with which objects and furniture are thrown around in the room, we may detect an entirely different motivation. The person who inhabits this space does not seem to be interested in maintaining appearances, which is the sign either of rebellion against societal norms or of simple depression at the face of the futility of this rebellion. Dame maman, who embodies both of these attributes, can never actually claim full ownership of her own living space, even though the home is traditionally conceived of as a female space. However, in such patriarchal cultures as are exhibited in *Purple Hibiscus* and *La négresse rousse*, the female experience of the home is curbed by the fact that these women have very little or no control over, let alone ownership of, their own lives, as the very space of the home will often reflect the men in their lives and their own lack of agency.<sup>18</sup>

It is no wonder, then, that the opening sentence of *Purple Hibiscus* echoes the title of Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* (and, concurrently, W. B. Yeats's "The Second Coming"), invoking the advent of female spaces, which is seen as a catastrophic event by the dominant culture. Initially, the idea of a way

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17 Calixthe Beyala, *La négresse rousse* (Paris: Éditions J'ai lu, 1997), p. 45. "La chambre de Dame maman était deux fois plus grande que la mienne. Une petite torche reflétait une fumée ocre qui allait s'effilochant. Sur la droite une commode habilement faite de six caisses de bière. [...] Du reste, la pièce ressemblait un grenier géant où seraient jetés pêle-mêle des vieux papiers, des bouts de coton échappés du matelas éventré, des boîtes de talc vides et des emballages de savon." All quotations from *La négresse rousse* appear in my translation, K. Gy.

18 An example of how (the lack of) ownership and agency are linked together is the disturbing incident in *Purple Hibiscus* when Papa breaks Mama's beloved porcelain figurines in a fit of rage and Kambili, who feels genuine compassion for her mother, cannot bring herself to utter what really happened: "I meant to say I am sorry that Papa broke your figurines, but the words that came out were, 'I'm sorry your figurines broke, Mama.'" (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, p. 10.)

of living different from what Eugene has established for himself and his family appears unorthodox and frightening to Kambili. But when the threat of impending political turmoil becomes too great, Eugene reluctantly agrees to send his children to Nsukka, where his estranged sister, Ifeoma, and her three children live. It is in Aunt Ifeoma's house that the fabric of Eugene's draconian rule truly starts falling apart and Kambili, who has so far been repressed even from speaking, encounters a space unlike any other she has seen before: "I noticed the ceiling first, how low it was. I felt I could reach out and touch it; it was so unlike home, where the high ceilings gave our rooms an airy stillness. The pungent fumes of kerosene smoke mixed with the aroma of curry and nutmeg from the kitchen."<sup>19</sup>

There is nothing of the elegant neutrality and demanding size of Eugene Achike's home in Ifeoma's humble abode, where furniture, books, and other knick-knacks are crammed into a small space that is hardly enough for the four people it houses, let alone the two visiting cousins. As strange as it is, the small size of the house and the low ceiling do not induce claustrophobia or paranoia in its occupants; rather, they render the cottage more of a place of intimacy and closeness so that when Kambili returns home she remarks how after her extended visit to Nsukka her family home seems to have too much empty, wasted space and not enough life. The juxtaposition between the energy and vigour of Ifeoma's home and the sterility of Papa's colonial abode is also emphasised by the strong smell of the kerosene stove and the spices mixing in the air and permeating every corner of the house, drawing attention to the vitality and spirit of its owner.

In *La négresse Rousse*, there is much overt discussion of women's allocated place, primarily articulated by the prominent men of Wuel. In this discourse, Dame maman and, by association, Mégri are, of course, presented as outcasts who have deviated from the designated path. Interestingly, while Ifeoma's house receives considerable attention in the narrative, the same does not happen in Beyala's novel, and Dame maman's lack of interest in making her house truly her own is also apparent in its absence from the narrative. There is, however, one significant moment when she loses her temper and cries out at the men in her life: "I have had enough of pretending to be a respectable family that nobody respects.

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19 Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, p. 113.



Today, I will go and regain my true place, the street. That's where you can find the home and family of women of ill repute."<sup>20</sup>

That Dame maman names the street as her true place is meaningful not only because a woman living on the street evokes a strange, alarming sort of freedom but also because at the same time, it embodies one of the most vulnerable positions imaginable for women. Even though she does not actually move out of her cottage, she still attempts to assert her power and to declare her choice by reclaiming the street as her own, this being the only time she is enthusiastic about the space she inhabits. This way, she also aligns herself with other outcast characters, such as Laetitia, the sexually unrestrained village beauty, or La-Moissonneuse-du-mal (The Harvester of Evil), who was banished from the village for a crime she did not commit and is now forced to roam the world – very similarly to Mégri's eventual fate.

Kearney accentuates the significance of Adichie's choice of a female character and female communities in general to act as the agent(s) of Kambili's Bildung,<sup>21</sup> resembling the singular female community that develops in and around the village of Wuel in *La négresse rousse*. It is essentially through these inspirational female figures in the lives of Kambili and Mégri that they learn about the various ways of flouting the rules of their male-dominated cultures. A powerful and compelling symbol of this defiance is the titular flower in Adichie's novel, signalling the advent of a new sort of independence: "Aunty Ifeoma's experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom from the one the crowds waving green leaves chanted at Government Square after the coup. A freedom to be, to do."<sup>22</sup> The freedom Kambili perceives in these flowers is far from political freedom or freedom from colonial rule; instead, it is the beginning of her own personal freedom and self-actualisation, making reference to femininity at the same time through the image of the hibiscus. It is in Ifeoma's house and with the help of her eldest daughter, Amaka, that Kambili opens her mouth for the first time and is given a voice – both literally and figuratively.

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20 Beyala, *La négresse rousse*, p. 37. "[...] j'en ai assez de jouer à la famille respectable que personne ne respecte. À partir d'aujourd'hui, je vais regagner mon vrai lieu qui est la rue. C'est là que se trouve la maison, la famille des femmes de mauvaise vie."

21 Jack Kearney, "The Representation of Child Deprivation in Three Contemporary African Novels: An Exploration," *English in Africa* 39.1 (May 2012), 125-144, p. 140.

22 Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, p. 16.

Another noteworthy element of Mégri's and Kambili's journeys towards self-hood is their budding sexuality, once again invoking Ifeoma's flowers. Hewett claims that women's embodied experience is often presented in Adichie's fiction as a crucial element in their development and that their coming to terms with their bodies should be viewed as an important milestone in this journey.<sup>23</sup> When Kambili meets young Father Amadi, a Catholic priest in training whose interpretation of the faith carries all the freedom and flexibility Eugene's fails to provide, she experiences a new sort of friendship, an erotic sensation in their relationship: "My chest was filled with something like bath foam. Light. The lightness was so sweet I tasted it on my tongue, the sweetness of an overripe bright yellow cashew fruit."<sup>24</sup> That Kambili can be so eloquent yet insecure about her newfound feelings is testimony to her development as a free, self-possessed young woman who is trying to establish her own voice. Later on, when Father Amadi touches her hand, she refuses to scrub it and lingers in the cool bath water to draw out this memory of bodily and spiritual intimacy as long as possible.

Mégri shares a not entirely dissimilar embodied experience. Hitchcott remarks how, at the very beginning of the novel, she is marked by two things: her flaming red hair (of course, very uncommon for a black African) and her wardrobe of dresses which she uses to shape her body according to societal expectations and thus manipulate those around her.<sup>25</sup> Hitchcott even claims that when she decides to seduce the Stranger, a mysterious man newly arrived to the village of Wuel, she consciously creates a mask of and for herself with make-up and various tricks, conforming to widespread ideas of attractiveness.<sup>26</sup> However, there are also genuine moments to this seduction, particularly when Mégri expresses her strong physical desire for the man:

He pressed my hands and suddenly, all the affection I felt for him turned into a profound desire for his body. All my other cravings, needs and intentions paled beside this. I wanted the Stranger. The need to possess him seized me completely. A dizzy spell, the touch of his skin took hold of

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23 Heather Hewett, "Coming of Age: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the Voice of the Third Generation," *English in Africa* 32.1 (May 2005), 73-97, p. 81.

24 Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, p. 180.

25 Hitchcott, p. 115.

26 Hitchcott, p. 115.

me. I wanted to take a razor and push aside, destroy everything that separated me from his skin.<sup>27</sup>

While she seems to be more overtly sexual and forthcoming than Kambili, the difficulty of articulating this yet unfamiliar passion is apparent in both novels, drawing attention to the liminality of the girls' position: their development is still ongoing, and there is much pain and confusion along the road. Mégri's seemingly unbounded, almost violent desire for the Stranger shows how she is coming into her own self and that this new self is sometimes overflowed with a need for possession and a desperate yearning for affection.

In *La négresse rousse*, there is a strong emphasis on the notion of becoming, which appears as early as the first page of the novel: "We like big projects in the family. I have one as well: TO BECOME. / Life. What life? Mine is made of forgetting and dresses."<sup>28</sup> Here, Mégri emphasises how her life at the beginning of the story is made up of a struggle with her burdensome past and heritage and her perceived need to act out various roles in society with her dresses. At the very end of the novel, however, the notion of becoming changes radically and begins to take on a certain shape: "I would take the hilly road to overcome the triple servitude of love, womanhood and destiny. Yes, tomorrow I'm going to Paris...I will find my father. I will rebuild my life. I will build other projects...We like big projects in the family. I have one as well: TO BECOME."<sup>29</sup> With what seems to be the experience of a whole lifetime behind her back, Mégri's reiteration of the promise of becoming gains new meaning when she mentions migration and dismantling the shackles of her past for good.

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27 Beyala, *La négresse rousse*, p. 96. "Il me serra les mains. Soudain, toute cette affection que j'éprouvais pour lui exigeait son incarnation. Et tous mes autres désirs, besoins, projets pâlis-  
saient auprès de celui-ci. Je voulais l'Étranger. La nécessité de la possession amoureuse s'empara  
de moi. Vertige, le contact de sa peau me saisissait. J'aurais voulu écarter, anéantir d'un coup  
de rasoir tout ce qui m'éloignait de sa peau [...]"

28 Beyala, *La négresse rousse*, p. 5. "Dans la famille nous aimons les grands projets. D'ailleurs, j'en ai  
un: DEVENIR. / La vie. Quelle vie? La mienne est faite d'oubli et de robes."

29 Beyala, *La négresse rousse*, p. 310. "J'emprunterais le chemin des collines pour dépasser la triple  
servitude de l'amour, de la femme, du destin. Oui, demain j'irais à Paris...Je retrouverais mon  
père. Je reconstruirais ma vie Je bâtirai d'autres projets...Dans la famille nous aimons les grands  
projets. D'ailleurs, j'en ai un: DEVENIR."

In Hitchcott's reading, Mègri's decision to leave her village to go to Paris renders migration itself a space of possibility, or at least a space that opens up new opportunities.<sup>30</sup> Apart from the inevitably political nature of migration, Beyala does not present an overtly anticolonial agenda in her novel, unlike Adichie, who very much positions *Purple Hibiscus* in the context of postcolonial Nigeria. Da Silva goes as far as claiming that through her abundant descriptions of domestic and other types of violence, Adichie articulates an "aesthetics of excess,"<sup>31</sup> this way vocalising the still ongoing savage process of postcolonial nation-making and the difficulty of finding the right voice to address it.

When looked at in the wider context of Adichie's and Beyala's respective oeuvres, these novels are shown to excel precisely in combining individual female Bildung with political Bildung. While on the surface they appear as coming-of-age stories of two young African girls, they also offer juxtaposition between the political and the familial, which are presented as opposing yet interrelated realms. In *Purple Hibiscus* and *La négresse rousse*, we are treated to stories of self-discovery in Africa in which both protagonists eventually leave for the Western world – while Mègri chooses Paris to continue her quest, Kambili decides to join her aunt Ifeoma and her children in America. In this sense, the spaces and experiences they encounter in Africa become significant learning sites for the characters in their long journeys for selfhood, as well as spaces of narrative experimentation for the authors, who later undertake the task of discussing the immigrant experience as well.<sup>32</sup> Migration seems to offer "the possibility for African women to perform their identities differently, to speak with another voice,"<sup>33</sup> while at the same time reminding us that there is no journey without a starting point. Kambili's and Mègri's stories are, then, to be read as the first, rudimentary steps

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<sup>30</sup> Hitchcott, p. 87.

<sup>31</sup> Tony Simoes da Silva, "Embodied Genealogies and Gendered Violence and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Writing," *African Identities* 10.4 (2012), 455-470, p. 456.

<sup>32</sup> Adichie's most exhaustive interrogation of the Nigerian diaspora experience up until now is her novel *Americanah*, published in 2013. She also explores this theme in several of her short stories in the collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009). Beyala, who has lived a significant portion of her life in Paris, perhaps inevitably shifted towards the topic of migration. Some of her better known Parisian novels are: *Le petit prince de Belleville* (1992), *Maman a un amant* (1993), *Assèze l'Africaine* (1994), *Les honneurs perdus* (1996), *Amours sauvages* (1999), and *Le roman de Pauline* (2009).

<sup>33</sup> Hitchcott, p. 67.

towards the difficult freedom growing up brings along for young African girls, but also as vantage points from which we may get a glimpse of what might await these girls in the future.

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# III REINVENTING GENDER ROLES





FANNI FELDMANN

## The Other Neighbour Controversial Homosexuality in the Television Soap Opera *Szomszédok (Neighbours)*

### INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Hungary, the television soap opera *Szomszédok (Neighbours)* has an ambiguous reputation. There are generations who watched the series from the very beginning (1987), liked or even loved it, and lived through the country's social, political, cultural, and economic changes and challenges, which were simultaneously represented and reflected on in the series as well. Some people still continue to love it and think of *Szomszédok* with nostalgic sentiments. There are other, younger generations who might laugh at the amateurish and rudimentary visual style of the series, the often clumsy and overtly didactic dialogues, but still admire it for offering an authentic experience of the atmosphere and mood of an era they did not experience first-hand. As Tímea Antalóczy explains, “*Szomszédok* can be interpreted as an imprint of an era. The series – while documenting the regime change, introducing different political value systems, and representing

everyday events from the audience's point of view – captured and commented on the constantly changing, difficult-to-understand reality of the post-socialist era.”<sup>1</sup>

Although *Szomszédok* is first of its kind in Hungary, the television soap opera format it adopts enjoys a long history both in a national and an international context. In Hungary, the serialised radio play *Szabó család* (*Szabó Family*) or the eight-part television series *Nyolc évszak* (*Eight Seasons*) can be seen as predecessors of *Szomszédok*. From the international scene, various examples could be mentioned, including American, Australian, East-German (GDR) and Czech series; nevertheless, in an interview, László Czető Bernát, the originator of *Szomszédok*, reveals that it was the English tradition of soap opera that had the greatest impact on the best known Hungarian TV soap. During a two-week study trip to England, he got acquainted with *Coronation Street* (1960-) and *EastEnders* (1985-), inspiring him to conceive *Szomszédok* and thus meet the demand for shows about the “here and now” in Hungarian popular television.<sup>2</sup> Like all foreign series of similar production philosophy, this initiation also hoped to capture everyday reality as experienced by common people, and aspired to offer a living canvas of their daily joys and challenges, quotidian problems and solutions. Holding a mirror to urban living conditions in panel blocks, a shared experience of almost half of the population, *Szomszédok* sought to be recognised as a key to grasping the state of the nation. Especially since it was the director Ádám Horváth's conscious decision to portray as much of Hungarian reality as possible. As he states, “we did not wish to pursue a block estate saga, the problems of these neighbourhoods do not interest me.”<sup>3</sup> Instead, he applied the space and atmosphere of the panel blocks to present general tendencies, and thus used the newly-built Gazdagrét district in Budapest as an allegory of the space of the nation. The idea to use communal space allegorically is not a novel one, as I will argue.

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- 1 Tímea Antalóczy, “A szappanoperák genezise és analízise II.” [“The Genesis and Analysis of Soap Operas II”], *Médiakutató* 2.3 (2001), 102–113, p. 103. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine, F. F.
  - 2 Mihály Vadas, *Szomszédok: 20 beszélgetés az alkotókkal* [*Neighbours: 20 Conversations with the Creators*] (Budapest: Mezőgazdasági Kiadó, 1989), p. 9.
  - 3 Mihály Vadas, *Szomszédok: 20 beszélgetés az alkotókkal* (1989), qtd in Ferenc Hammer, “Coy Utopia: Politics in the First Hungarian TV Soap,” in *Popular Television in Eastern Europe During and Since Socialism*, eds Anikó Imre, Timothy Havens, and Katalin Lustyik (London: Routledge, 2013), 222–240, p. 224. Translated by Hammer.

In contrast with the previously mentioned assumption that *Szomszédok* is a realistic portrayal of a bygone era, the creators of the series were in fact more interested in the idealised spatial backgrounds of idyllic communal relationships. Authentic as the physical space might be (and credit must be given to Horváth for using on-location sites), the cultural semiotics that spatiality carries in the series is farcical and often absurd. Apart from the overtly idealistic representation of communities and characters, the soap opera can also be criticised for its superficial understanding of the existential-economic threats people were subjected to, and for its disinterest towards the deeper structure (the social and psychological elements) of human conflicts. The third reason why *Szomszédok* failed to capture a socio-culturally valid image of pre/post-regime change Hungary is the popular television format with its reliance on overgeneralisations, stereotypes, and clichés. The outspoken aim of the series was to target popular tastes: depicting characters, situations, and places so as to attract the largest possible audience and offer maximum identification with them. It is not by chance that the creators employed two different strategies when casting actors for different roles. They either chose elderly big shots of the Hungarian acting community (like Ferenc Zenthe) or young, unknown but talented actors. On the one hand, the well-known names meant points of orientation and identification for the viewers, and the familiar faces and voices raised interest towards the series. On the other hand, the unknown actors (like Károly Nemcsák) did not evoke memories of their earlier, well-known roles, and provided a blank canvas, which allowed audiences to fully identify with the characters they played.

My paper explores the then unknown Imre Bajor's part as Mr. Oli. What made this character stand out from the rest of the cast was his homosexuality, a queer-ness which broke through certain representational taboos in popular media as – after decades of surveillance, hiding, criminalisation, and medicalisation – a gay character would finally appear on Hungarian primetime television. Yet, he was hardly more than a caricature, a comic and degrading portrayal of male homosexuality, and his depiction often followed attitudes we can find (even today) in vulgar jokes about gay men. I will argue that Mr Oli's queer identity was constructed in the series with great care, and the narrative emphasised those surface aspects of homosexuality which audiences could accept or laugh at without having to consider their transgressive and non-heteronormative elements. I will explore the psychological, spatial, and communal aspects of this docile, tolerable,

and likeable queerness, and also look at how it repressed the assertive and open homosexuality that would have inevitably violated conservative social norms.

#### IDEALISED CHARACTERS, UTOPIAN COMMUNITY

The makers of the series “had to invent characters whose life the whole Hungarian population could relate to. There had to be young, old and middle generation figures, also workers, intellectuals, and possibly those having some sort of ties with the countryside.”<sup>4</sup> The professions of the characters also show great diversity: the list includes a beautician, an EMT paramedic, a shop assistant, a taxi driver, an elementary school teacher, a printer, an entrepreneur, a forest engineer, as well as an aging, single artist.<sup>5</sup> There is one common feature in all these various characters: they are decent and hard-working people. As director Ádám Horváth pointed out, “these people had to be better and more exemplary than average people, otherwise the whole story would lose its function. Circumstances are just as bad and ugly as in reality, but these people must always face the challenge.”<sup>6</sup> That is why delinquents and negative characters are present only in the background of the story; they are nameless and/or invisible; and if something fearful or terrible penetrates from the outside world, we only learn about it from the conversations and gossips, the remarks and interpretations of the heroes. Mr. Oli falls between these two poles: his respectability is guaranteed by his professional skills and achievements as a hairdresser; however, his queerness creates an air of ambiguity, suspicion, and uncleanness around his character. When applying for the job, his future employers listen to his verbal extravaganza (for example, his rhyming slogan, which evokes the style of state-socialist advertising) with much suspicion, and are evidently shocked at the thought of having a homosexual man around. Later, their better business judgement wins over their aversions.<sup>7</sup>

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4 Vadas qtd in Hammer, p. 223. Translated by Hammer.

5 Ferenc Hammer, “Coy Utopia: Politics in the First Hungarian TV Soap,” in *Popular Television in Eastern Europe During and Since Socialism*, eds Anikó Imre, Timothy Havens, and Katalin Lustyik (London: Routledge, 2013), 222–240, p. 223.

6 Vadas, p. 136.

7 *Szomszédok* [*Neighbours*], dir. Ádám Horváth (Magyar Televízió, 1987–1999), 4.81 (31 May 1990), 07:35–09:16.

It is the above-mentioned, more or less idealised characters who constitute the ideal neighbourhood in a ten-storey building. Representing these figures as an exemplary model community is another key feature of the series. The lives of the three families – the Takács, Mágenheim, and Vágási families – are not always perfect and free from hardships, but are generally peaceful and affectionate, with solidarity being the strongest bond among them. It is not by chance that *Szomszédok* “never allow[s] any serious conflict among members of the three central families.”<sup>8</sup> This representation of an idealised panel block community radically differs from those depicted in the art films of the 1970s and 1980s, like Péter Bacsó’s *The Agony of Mr. Boroka* (1972) and *A Piano in Midair* (1976), Livia Gyarmathy’s *9th Floor* (1977), Judit Ember’s *Mistletoes* (1978), Béla Tarr’s *Family Nest* (1979) and *Prefab People* (1982), and György Szomjas’s *Wall Driller* (1985).<sup>9</sup> Zsolt Győri analyses the scene at the hairdresser’s in *The Agony of Mr. Boroka* in which the infamous accident with one of the guests occurs. In the examined composition, we see a poster of a young man with an immaculate hairdo and the mirror-reflection of the elderly guest just realising – to his astonishment – that the barber accidentally cropped his hair along the middle of his scalp. Győri regards this composition as an allegory of the inner contradictions of the propagandistic and the real achievements of state socialism: “the images of the idealized and the disfigured face placed literally next to each other point – in an unambiguous yet satirical manner – to the irreconcilability of how people were expected to see reality in an ideologically correct way and how they actually saw it.”<sup>10</sup> I believe this schizophrenic social consciousness underlying the conflict of official and private approaches to reality grasped the state of the nation rather precisely. In contrast, the populist representation of the idealised community of Gazdagrét in *Szomszédok* does not capture the actual conditions of panel blocks in the 1980s and early 1990s, and bears a hardly hidden ideological function: the series offers a positive self-image to the viewers; it depicts this community the way the viewers wanted to see it and not how they actually saw it. The dark side of communal

8 Hammer, p. 224.

9 The titles in Hungarian are as follows: Péter Bacsó: *Forró vizet a kopaszra!* and *Zongora a levegőben*, Livia Gyarmathy: *Kilencedik emelet*, Judit Ember: *Fagyöngyök*, Béla Tarr: *Családi tűzfészek* and *Panelkapcsolat*, György Szomjas: *Falfűró*.

10 Zsolt Győri, “Concrete Utopias: Discourses of Domestic Space in Central Eastern European Cinema,” in *Cultural Studies Approaches in Eastern European Cinema: Spaces, Bodies, Memories*, ed Andrea Virginás (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 28–49, p. 40..

living – like burglary, quarrels about noise and maintenance, alcoholism, family violence, etc. – are not presented in a realistic manner. The Gazdagrét community, therefore, is an allegory of the ideal national community, a “coy utopia,”<sup>11</sup> an optimistic portrayal of a period of recent Hungarian history most people remember as a “transitional chaos.”<sup>12</sup>

#### SOCIETY AND SOCIAL ATTITUDES IN TRANSITION

In theory, after 1989, the LGBTQ community should not have been forced into hiding, neither should have filmmakers and television producers been bound by (self-)censorship after the ideological and authoritative pressure ceased to exist with the regime change.<sup>13</sup> Circumstances should have been ideal for addressing and portraying historical repressions. Unfortunately, this did not happen: although filmmakers had access to new financial sources – such as international co-productions, foreign film funds, or the Soros Foundation, which supported grassroots initiations of civic society –, these were either available for already established directors (like István Szabó, Károly Makk, or Béla Tarr) or covered the costs of low-budget films. Therefore, only well-prepared, internationally interesting and co-financed projects had the chance to be put onto the screen. However, such projects would not address the topic of sexual otherness. Homosexual directors also failed to take advantage of the creative freedom provided by the political transformation, and their public coming out did not happen either.<sup>14</sup>

The period portrayed in the series coincided with the development of several new discourses and socio-economic practices, such as the advancement of

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<sup>11</sup> Hammer, p. 223.

<sup>12</sup> Balázs Böcskei, “Lakótelep, modernitás, *Szomszédok*-party” [“Panel Blocks, Modernity, *Neighbours* party”], *Élet és Irodalom* 54.12 (2010), 4, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> For more on this, see Fanni Feldmann, “Előbújni a vasfüggöny mögül: a szexuális másság ábrázolása a magyar filmben a rendszerváltás előtt és után” [“Coming out From Behind the Iron Curtain: Representations of Sexual Otherness in Hungarian Films Before and After the Regime Change”], in *Tér, hatalom és identitás viszonyai a magyar filmben*, eds Zsolt Győri and György Kalmár (Debrecen: Debrecen University Press, 2015), 183–201.

<sup>14</sup> For further details about the realities of Hungarian film production in the 1990s, see Balázs Varga, “A magyar filmszakma és a rendszerváltás” [“The Hungarian Film Industry and the Regime Change”], *Metropolis* 14.4 (2010), 10–18.

consumer society and neoliberal economic principles. No doubt, it was the fall of the state-socialist regime that created a higher level of publicity and a legal background for these alternative economic and trade practices. After 1989, they could exist parallel to one another, complete or exclude one another without being officially and authoritatively supported or suppressed. Beside paternalistic attitudes and repressive discursive strategies – which characterised the previous regime –, new, previously excluded or marginalised voices could be heard. Coming back to my example, the spreading of consumer society and neoliberal practices in economy resulted in private businesses which started to flourish from the 1980s. This also occurred in garages, basements, and bodegas of large housing estates which began to offer goods and services to the neighbourhood. The beauty shop in *Szomszédok* exemplifies this transformation and foregrounds survival strategies that are very different from the economic security enjoyed by employees of the state sector.<sup>15</sup> In the social utopia centred around the three families, the beauty shop is the odd one out: human relations are not based on solidarity, friendship, or kind-heartedness, but on competition, profit, and being business-minded. As opposed to the socialist and collectivist space of the upper floors, the basement is a site of capitalism and individualism. It is not necessarily portrayed as a pleasant world, but more progressive and modernising than the one associated with utopian egalitarianism in the series. This “Gábor-Juli-Oli Studio,” which bears the first names of its owners, exemplifies the new era of the late 1980s when people could more easily become entrepreneurs, self-employed businessmen, or managers. Furthermore, in the highly functional living spaces of the panel blocks, the beauty salon is a rather hybrid location. Its interior is homely, yet, it is not a home; it is a workplace for some, but not in the traditional sense, as customers expect a homely, informal atmosphere. It has literal and symbolic functions: a space for light-hearted social interaction, conversation, even gossiping between client and beautician/hairdresser; a fascinating space of transformation – “part underworld, part art, in short, bohemian”<sup>16</sup> – where people exchange their views on various topics while their appearances are remade. This unconventional,

<sup>15</sup> The entrepreneur around the regime change was the mythical figure capable of amassing fortunes within months usually by bending the rules. They were the self-made men, ready to take risks, to support themselves in various ways (rather than relying on the welfare system), to track trends and to make decisions on their own.

<sup>16</sup> *Szomszédok*, 6.146 (25 November 1992), 14:54.



fluid, and hybrid space introduced in 1990 the counter-normative figure of Mr. Oli, the extravagant, light-hearted, cute gay hairdresser. His character is based on traditional and conservative conceptions (also found in heteronormative jokes); however, his mere presence in the series is a symptom of audiences becoming increasingly aware of the need to dispute and renegotiate normative aspects of their reality. He is not only a representation of how the Hungary of the early 1990s *imagined* sexual otherness, but at the same time he is also an invention of colliding – earlier officialised or excluded – discursive strategies of sexual otherness. He exemplifies that the visibility of queerness was already possible to the extent it did not interfere much with popular preconceptions or introduce a radical and political discourse of queer empowerment.

I believe that the date of his appearance is symbolic. Before 1990, it would have been unimaginable to have a homosexual character in a popular television series because – as Thomas Peele argues – “popular culture both reflects current values and teaches them to us,”<sup>17</sup> and also because “the public sphere of the socialist era considered non-heterosexual love and eroticism as deviant and taboo.”<sup>18</sup> Even heterosexual relationships, and especially marriage, were filtered through ideology: according to the official definition of “socialist marriage,” it had to be based on a balance between love and a sense of duty.<sup>19</sup> To clarify what appropriate family life meant, children received an obligatory education on the topic as early as primary school. Furthermore, there were suggestions which promoted that “family-life education” should begin already in kindergarten, where children ought to learn – through role-playing games – their proper place in the patriarchal gender continuum.<sup>20</sup> What is more, teachers and doctors were to inform parents about the inappropriateness of raising their daughters and sons differently than gender prescriptions allowed. In other words, heterosexuality – understood as the biologically natural form of sexuality – was a cornerstone of children’s (and parents’) gender education. Therefore, the reach and popularity of *Szomszédok* would not have allowed its makers to include a counter-normative

17 Thomas Peele, *Queer Popular Culture: Literature, Media, Film, and Television* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 2.

18 András Murai and Eszter Zsófia Tóth, *Szex és szocializmus [Sex and Socialism]* (Budapest: Libri, 2014), p. 134.

19 Murai and Tóth, p. 33.

20 Judit Takács, “Disciplining gender and (homo)sexuality in state-socialist Hungary in the 1970s,” *European Review of History: Revue européenne d’histoire* 22.1 (2015), 161–175, p. 166.

figure while the state-socialist regime stood, but after its sudden collapse in 1989-90, previously excluded, repressed, and marginalised voices gained strength, while the static attitudes of the old system still existed. Writing about the 1970s, Judit Takács asserts that “[t]he homosexual character was viewed mostly with a mixture of rejection and pity,”<sup>21</sup> which would very much be valid for the next decade; however, after the sweeping political and legal changes in the early 1990s, “social attitudes towards homosexuality became slightly more permissive.”<sup>22</sup>

### QUEER AMBIGUITIES

The changes in the socio-cultural climate certainly supported the visibility of queerness in popular television; nevertheless, only a closer examination can answer questions about the nature of such representations. Since *Szomszédok* relies strongly on the English tradition of soap opera, it is worth examining whether we find queer storylines in these inspirational sources. In fact, the character of Collin Russell in *EastEnders* (first appearance in 1986) counts as “the first gay character to appear regularly in a British soap opera,”<sup>23</sup> who – with partner Guido Smith – is responsible for “the first gay kiss on [British] teatime TV”<sup>24</sup> in an episode broadcasted in January 1989. Basic facts such as these already point to two remarkable differences. Firstly, British popular television shows a five-year advantage in touching upon the socially controversial topic of homosexuality. Secondly, and more relevantly to my present arguments, queerness was portrayed openly even if this raised moral concerns in audiences. In his introduction to *British Queer Cinema*, Robin Griffiths formulates an essential insight also applicable to representations of queerness: “For to declare oneself as ‘queer’ not only enables an opportunity to re-define ourselves against ‘the norm’ – however that manifests itself in relation to both homo- and hetero-sexuality – but also allows for a querying (or queering) of the stability of such notions of ‘normality’, and the

21 Takács, pp. 168-169.

22 Judit Takács, Tamás Dombos, György Mészáros, and Tamás Tóth P., eds, *Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Bother: Homophobia and the Heteronorm in Hungary* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2012), p. 80.

23 Libby Brooks, “Without Prejudice,” *The Guardian*, accessed 18 July 2015.

24 Tom Geoghean, “It Started with a Kiss,” *BBC News Magazine*, accessed 17 July 2015.

validity of the accepted epistemology of sexuality itself.”<sup>25</sup> In my understanding, Griffiths’s description enables us to differentiate between two distinct politics of homosexual representations: one that defines itself according to the norm without questioning it, and the other which questions the stability of norms.

To comprehend the dissimilar connotations lurking behind the term *queer*, I propose to talk about homosexual representations in the adjectival and noun forms. In contemporary academic discourse – in queer theory and gay and lesbian studies – the word *queer* has acquired an empowering status as a noun: a word referring to a person, a place, a type of behaviour, etc. Something has crystallised around a self-sustained difference, a difference-in-itself. *Queer* as a noun recognises a mindset, a value system, and a lifestyle as an independent way of being, an existence and identity that does not make excuses, look for sympathies, thrive to constantly explain itself, or consciously surround itself with ambiguities. Concerning the latter, Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* proposes that “[s]ometimes gender ambiguity can operate precisely to contain or deflect non-normative sexual practice and thereby work to keep normative sexuality intact.”<sup>26</sup> *Queer* in the adjectival sense never questions the “accepted epistemology of sexuality,”<sup>27</sup> but extends it to representations of queerness, and emphasises the unorthodox or extraordinary nature of being homosexual. Portraying homosexuality as difference relative to normality recalls the linguistic status of the adjective – a part of speech that modifies, specifies, or qualifies a noun, while also being dependent on it. In my understanding, Mr. Oli exemplifies this second case of relative difference/otherness: his gender ambiguity does not question the heteronormative prejudices of the series, and his comic subversion is only an example of unorthodox behaviour, rather than a valid counterexample of normative sexual identity patterns.

In Mr. Oli’s personality, queerness is present in a double sense. On the one hand, he is represented as a formulaic gay man whose homosexuality is depicted through stereotypically feminine gender characteristics and allures. As far as verbal production is concerned, his speech is higher-pitched than the more masculine voices of the series, and he also lisps: a clear sign of his deviation from the verbal

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25 Robin Griffiths, *British Queer Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 4.

26 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1999), p. xiv.

27 Griffiths, p. 4.

norm.<sup>28</sup> In addition, most of his lines concern beauty, style, and gossiping – topics considered feminine in the patriarchal tradition. Furthermore, his pretty and charming gestures and the way he moves his hands also distance the character from the masculine world and mark his excessive fascination with feminine norms of self-expression. Moreover, his clothes are more colourful, extravagant, fashionable, and more stylish than those of the other male characters in the soap opera. This kind of exaggeration, extravaganza, and excessiveness are key markers of his comic, likeable queerness, which is most importantly conceptualised by heterosexual and heteronormative filmmakers. Paulina Palmer explains that “[q]ueer theorists too depict homosexuality [...] as evoking (from a phallogocentric viewpoint) connotations of excess.”<sup>29</sup> In this case, excess is a measurement of relative difference, a deviation from the norm of restraint, moderation, and self-discipline – the pillars of the masculine world. This logic, in my view, is applicable to *Szomszédok*, where Mr. Oli’s homosexuality is constructed as a feminine excess (a surplus of femininity in a man), whereas queerness is defined as a deviant form of masculine sexuality: a fractured, entangled masculinity.

The series does everything to stress that we should understand Mr. Oli’s queerness as deviation from masculinity. Having said that, his character clearly incorporates patriarchal values, which, in my view, is the other side of his double queerness. I regard his praise of men in both sexual and social terms and his disgust towards women as a way of compensating for his own femininity. At one point, he passionately proclaims, “I am so ashamed of being such a feminine phenomenon.”<sup>30</sup> Exposing the psychological symptoms of a failed coming out he compensates on many occasions with behaving like a misogynist. For example, when Juli, the beautician of the salon, asks him whether his client is his fiancée or his girlfriend, he answers, “Yuk! She is my sister.”<sup>31</sup> Another suggestive example is when he condemns a poster of a woman (hanging as decoration in the salon)

28 Imre Bajor, the actor who played Mr. Oli, when first seeing the script, did not understand why all the [f] sounds were written as [s]. For further details on the anecdote, see Gábor Apats and Csaba Kalmár, “A *Szomszédok* utat tört a melegeknek” [“*Neighbours* Paved the Way for the Gay”], *Origo*, accessed 17 July 2015.

29 Paulina Palmer, *The Queer Uncanny: New Perspectives on the Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), p. 7.

30 *Szomszédok*, 4.96 (27 December 1992), 22:24.

31 *Szomszédok*, 4.81 (31 May 1990), 08:10.

for being “disgusting,” “terrible,” and “abominable.”<sup>32</sup> Likewise revealing is his comment about an aerobics class: “Horrible! It’s not enough that they’re women, they’re also fat, and they’re suffering.”<sup>33</sup> Within the context of homosexual identity formation, such reactions – in my view – are signs of repressing his true sexual identity. The same is valid for his contradictory behaviour patterns, his miming and exaggerating traditional feminine and masculine gender characteristics. He is like the ivy and the oak at the same time. In more tolerant environments, the “miming of gender norms [...] can be subversive to the extent that it reflects on the performative characters of gender,”<sup>34</sup> and thus, queerness can acquire the status of an empowered noun by resisting gender norms. However, in the case of Mr. Oli, this remains an unrealised prospect, and consequently, his character and ambiguous otherness remain the adjectival expressions of queerness.

The adjectival notion of his queerness is rooted in the then contemporary conceptions and misconceptions about homosexuality; however, his sexual orientation is never actually stated openly in the series. At the time of its making, both the official and the non-official discourses on homosexuality mixed up and inter-fused the “three contingent dimensions of corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity and gender performance,”<sup>35</sup> and perceived them within the heteronormative and phallogentric regime. This is what we see in the idea discussed above, according to which, if you are gay, you must be a feminine, unmanly man. More importantly, Mr. Oli also identifies with this very regime, decides to play along its rules, and performs the assumed notions of queerness even at the cost of having to constantly closet his true sexuality and repress a part of his personality. It is no surprise that he often seems confused about his gender. His identity crisis is openly expressed, for example, in the scene when he calls himself “queen of the hairdressers,” but immediately adds confusedly, “I mean ... king.”<sup>36</sup> In another episode, he explains, “[m]y field of interest is hair. But if something goes wrong, I no longer know if I’m a boy or a girl.”<sup>37</sup> On other occasions, he is jokingly challenged on similar grounds: “I could prove that I stand on my feet like a man!”, but Etus,

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32 *Szomszédok*, 4.87 (23 August 1990), 21:14.

33 *Szomszédok*, 4.92 (01 November 1990), 18:47.

34 Chris Barker, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice* (London: Sage, 2003), p. 299.

35 Butler, p. 187.

36 *Szomszédok*, 5.107 (30 May 1991), 15:02.

37 *Szomszédok*, 5.100 (21 February 1991), 11:40.

who is the beautician, Juli's mother, adds, "[a]nd that, dear Oli, would surprise you the most."<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, when being addressed with professional inquiries, he replies, "[d]on't ask questions like that from me. Ask Juli! She is the man here."<sup>39</sup> Moreover, his employer sometimes calls him Mrs. Oli instead of Mr. Oli. These examples, in my understanding, prove that *Szomszédok* addresses homosexuality as confused and not contested masculinity. This confusion is even more evident since Gábor, the most business-minded member and therefore leader of the studio, personifies prototypical masculine gender roles: he drinks, constantly flirts with women, smokes expensive cigars, and he is an expert in resolving financial crises. At the same time, Juli the beautician is the embodied role model of femininity with her soft voice, patience, empathy, and beauty. She prospers in all the three roles which were expected of women: she is successful in being "a mother, a wife and a working woman."<sup>40</sup> Mr. Oli cannot stand alcohol and is not too patient either (so he is in contrast with both of them), yet, more importantly, with the obligatory title *Mr.* before his name, he is also portrayed as an asexual aristocratic relative, or even an artist who longs for only beauty but not the body. He even verbalises his asexuality when discussing the idea of making him the co-manager of the business. He says, "[t]here would be the three of us then. A man, a woman, and me."<sup>41</sup> Either way, Mr. Oli does not threaten the heteronormative matrix of the salon.

His ambiguous and excessive personality defines him as queer both in the smaller community of the beauty shop and the larger community of Gazdagrét. In both cases, he remains an outsider. Even though he becomes a co-manager in Gábor's firm, Mr Oli cannot really fit in. Gábor and Juli more or less accept him as their business partner, but often tease and make fun of him. Furthermore, they reject his progressive ideas, such as adding male cosmetics to their line of business or starting to sell natural cosmetic products – two areas that proved to be successful services in real life. He finds his place within both the business and the interpersonal context of the salon with more difficulty than if he were a straight person. As a hairdresser he is self-assured, but as a colleague and later business

38 *Szomszédok*, 4.84 (12 July 1990), 20:10.

39 *Szomszédok*, 4.89 (20 September 1990), 08:22.

40 Eszter Zsófia Tóth, *Kádár leányai: Nők a szocialista időszakban* [*Kádár's Daughters: Women in the Socialist Era*] (Budapest: Nyitott Könyvműhely, 2010), p. 9.

41 *Szomszédok*, 5.98 (24 January 1991), 24:13.

partner he is constantly looking for positive feedback from the heteronormative characters, which is not rare in popular depictions of sexual otherness, as “the texts of popular culture frequently represent lesbian and gay people as being in need of acceptance by straight people.”<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, he does not become a member of the larger Gazdagrét community either. He remains a minor character with only a couple of minutes of screen time every second or third episode. Unlike the three central families, he does not live there nor knows the main characters, only those women who are clients of the beauty salon. Those who meet him admire his wit and his pleasant and polite manners, but they never engage in deeper conversation with him. We do not get to know any of his more serious relations or close community (if he has any). He is too self-reserved to develop an affectionate relationship with anyone from the community. This should come as no surprise in the world of popular television series since the attitudes of othering and marginalising queer-ness are also present in similar television series, including the American *Friends*, in which Thomas Peele points to strategies I have also explored in *Szomszédok*:

Same-sex desire between the men is regularly invoked to propel the action of the series but it is never allowed to achieve sexual expression. Queer desire is tolerated and made use of, but it is never presented as a desirable state. [...] The characters are regular but marginal; they are in no way central to the plot.<sup>43</sup>

Mr. Oli's isolation within the community does not allow him to move forward the narrative action; he never enters the locations where the main plotlines unfold. He almost exclusively appears in the confined space of the beauty shop depicted as his natural habitat. By natural habitat I wish to suggest that the hairdresser's salon is a space rich in both feminine and masculine gender connotations. On the one hand, it is a place to spend free time, entertain oneself, and achieve self-fulfilment through beautification and perfecting one's image. On the other hand, it is a workplace, the serious space of business, which adds to it a pinch of masculinity, since commerce is – according to the traditional “gendered logic of

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42 Peele, p. 2.

43 Peele, pp. 2-3.

public/private binary”<sup>44</sup> – the area where men realise their dreams. It is a hybrid space, even a queer space, to use Judith Halberstam’s term,<sup>45</sup> but as such it is also the place where Mr. Oli will never achieve self-realisation. *Szomszédok* seems to suggest that the only legitimate space for a gay person is this closed room without a view, the closet where the heteronormative sexual politics of the series locks him up. His hairdressing section within the beauty parlour represents the controlled, repressed, marginalised queerness that can be nothing more than the source of laughter and comic relief in the short intervals of more serious action. As the heteronormative community tries to survive in a world of swift political and economic changes, they never for a second show serious consideration for this other(ed) neighbour who is spatially isolated, psychologically alienated, and marginalised with regards to the community.

## CONCLUSION

The closest *Szomszédok* ever comes to naming the homosexuality of the character is through a lady client in the beauty salon who says, “[o]h Oli you must explain to me one day because you people ... you people are so queer.”<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately, Mr. Oli never explains anything; more precisely, he is never expected to explain anything or come out of the closet. Neither the filmmakers (including actors) nor the audiences seem ready for an empowered queerness. According to Ferenc Hammer – whose opinion I fully share –, “by today’s standards, Mr. Oli, a funny gay man in a pink outfit with a lisp, represents the worst stereotypical representations of homosexuality.”<sup>47</sup> My article hoped to illuminate how such a (today) stereotypical representation is constructed, and arrived at the conclusion that *Szomszédok* appropriates the gay character’s being lost in a heteronormative world

44 Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), p. 8.

45 Halberstam, p. 1.

46 *Szomszédok*, 6.146 (25 November 1992), 12:40. The original Hungarian line is the following: “Jaj, Olikám, egyszer majd elcsalom magát és elmeséli, hogy maguk ... szóval, hogy maguk ... hogy maguk olyan furcsák.” The word *furcsa* – translated above as *queer* – has similar connotations in Hungarian as *queer* in English, meaning strange, different, weird. However, it has never been recaptured or reinterpreted by the Hungarian LGBTQ community.

47 Hammer, p. 228.



for its comic potential. I furthermore believe that the series constructs the notion of the *funny gay man* without ever considering the clumsiness, uncertainty, and ambiguity of Mr. Oli as pathologies of a closeted identity forced to be suppressed and to be compensated for. I regard the superficial psychological portrayal not only as a proof of the low aesthetic quality and dramatic realism of the series but also as a sign that tells us more about the state of the nation and the mentalities of its citizens than anything else in this soap opera. Until we comprehend queerness as a confusion and not a contestation of gender norms, a (self-)alienating and not an empowering deviation from traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, the representation of Mr. Oli will remain a model of addressing sexual otherness without moral concerns, and – as a queer in the shop window – continue to be a source of careless entertainment.

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KRISZTINA KITI TÓTH

## The Uncertain Referent Gender Blending Narration in Michèle Roberts's *Flesh and Blood*

In a literary text, the recognition of the Other within the self makes possible a narration that escapes the notion of a single and stable meaning and identity. By scrutinizing the plurality of voices presented in Michèle Roberts's novel *Flesh and Blood* (1994), I wish to investigate how the question of fluid identity is elaborated in the text. Roberts weaves and assembles the narrative of *Flesh and Blood* from fragments, thus creating a novel composed of multiple tales. The plurality of voices that are nested in the heterogeneous narrative produces a Chinese box structure: tales embedded in tales that are embedded in a larger frame, conferring an aura of ambiguity on the story. As the narrative frame (the interlocking stories of Frederica in the first and last chapters) moves further into a narrative maze of more embedded stories, multiple narrative voices emerge, alluding to the narratable self and to its desire.

In choosing to weave my paper around the histories of specific characters – namely, Frederica, who journeys from daughterhood into motherhood, and the nineteenth-century painter character of the embedded stories, Georgina, whose story most powerfully portrays the representation of the Other within the self with gender reversal – I wish to examine the means by which the text explores the problems of identity. For both characters, cross-dressing opens up new opportunities: Frederica disguises herself in order to escape from her judgmental environment, and Georgina puts on men's clothing so as to be able to take her place in the male-dominated artistic circles and achieve success in the art world. By providing insight into the constructed nature of societal

roles, cross-dressing as a performance disrupts the certainty that is needed to maintain social norms. I shall utilize Judith Butler's theories of gender and performativity,<sup>1</sup> and argue that gender performances in the novel expose ways in which gender can be constructed in our cultural practices, which are also capable of imposing prescribed gender roles on individual bodies.

With the representation of gender ambiguity, Roberts examines and critiques the concepts of a fixed self and gender. The multiplication of self and gender leads to liberation from gender fixity. Such transgression points towards the necessity of rethinking critical labels with regard to performative identity. In Roberts's work, stable subjectivity is absent, which has a liberating effect when compared to traditional modes of identity. Positioning both gender and self as commutable, the narrative unfolds different options of identity, and manages to liberate the self from the tyranny of reference. By showing the performative dimension of both self and gender, the novel opens up new feasible possibilities that may constitute different options of Otherness. As a whole, the text produces a link between identity and storytelling that brings into play the need for the Other.

### MULTIPLICITY

Roberts's narrative opens with the story of Frederica Stonehouse, a young woman who confesses to having murdered her mother. Frederica's narrative segues into multiple tales; a set of short narratives unfold between the interlocking first and last chapters, which are titled "Fred" and "Frederica," respectively. Yet, in the final chapter, Frederica's tale unravels and we learn that her crime consists in being pregnant with an illegitimate child and turning away from her mother and her harassing criticism. Therefore, as Hertel argues, "her murder is not that of flesh and blood but merely a metaphorical one:"<sup>2</sup> Frederica murders her mother by depriving her of motherhood. The chapters "Fred" and "Frederica" endorse the body of the text: a potentially fertile body ready to generate new frames. The embedded narratives of the novel

1 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011).

2 Ralf Hertel, *Making Sense: Sense Perception in the British Novel of the 1980s and 1990s* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), p. 133.

produce interrelations between the aspects of Frederica's identity and the narrated stories. She shares stories not only from her own life, as in the chapter "Freddy," but also from the lives of those that she might have encountered; stories heard, read, and/or (re)created; stories that are part of her subjective reality. In these thirteen embedded narratives, various events, locations, and time periods are covered by the various narrators, including Frederica's childhood in 1950s London, Georgina's fable of the making of impressionist paintings in the nineteenth century, the story of Rosa taking the place of her mother who fled into the wilderness, or the Garden of Eden. The multitude of histories respond to a variety of needs: cultural, social, or religious, all constituted by Frederica's interaction with her surroundings as well as by the influence of society on her. With the plurality of narrators and the meaning shifts, the boundary between context and text is blurred. The embedded stories create a rather loosely knit plot for the novel; each chapter merges into the following one, occasionally petering out with no resolution. The stories are meditations and reflections on motherhood, creation, and death, and the common motifs are love-hate relationships between mothers and daughters, religious fervor, and sexuality. The motifs work as echoes and threads throughout the book, binding the stories to one another.

In the course of the novel, the reader realizes that the several narratives referring to various story worlds can be collated in one overarching frame; it is Frederica who appropriates the stories as a means of personal expression. By the end of the first chapter, an analogy is drawn between Frederica and Scheherazade, the storyteller who continually unfolds one tale immediately after another in an inventive splicing way in order to postpone her death: "Scheherazade had told stories, night after night, to save her life. She made them up. She was a storyteller. I didn't know whether or not the stories that jostled in my head were true, or whether I was a liar. So many different voices chattered inside me" (6).<sup>3</sup> Frederica finds herself in between true and invented stories. She leaves behind her life-story that she constitutively interweaves with many other stories, this way fashioning herself into the narrator.

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3 All parenthesized references are to this edition: Michèle Roberts, *Flesh and Blood* (London: Virago Press, 1994).



For Scheherazade, “[n]arrative equals life; the absence of narrative equals death.”<sup>4</sup> With her courage, erudition, and wit, Scheherazade establishes a pattern of spinning out an exciting tale but stopping before it reaches an end, sparking the imagination of the king. Forsaking her own safety and, potentially, her life, she sets out to save the lives of thousands of women. Scheherazade’s storytelling proves that language has a transformative ability. The act of storytelling, therefore, becomes an act of transformation. Roberts’s choice of likening Frederica to Scheherazade is a means to show the potential of storytelling and language to transform and to heal. The parallel also highlights Frederica’s definitive role in the embedded stories as the primary narrator of the frame stories. Furthermore, from the point of view of language, both characters fight for the right of free expression and use language to deter either physical or psychological violence. However, Frederica seems uncertain about whether her narratives can save or transform her: “I wasn’t sure if my stories could save my life or my mother’s” (7). Just like Scheherazade, she applies narrative skills to achieve her desired goal; by using language as a means of self-expression, she gains courage and manages to re-determine her personality. Hearing the various voices chattering inside her head, Frederica picks a word and holds it like the end of a yarn that she can wind up: “Out of the babble inside me I picked a word. I held it like the end of a thread, unravelled, that I could wind as I wove my way into the labyrinth” (7). This word is *love*, and it brings into being the several embedded stories, the actual plot of the novel. Therefore, the plot is produced from Frederica’s very own but multiple perspectives. By inserting other narrators, Frederica mobilizes her identity from a fixed narrative form to an elusive one; her thread and the journey of the labyrinth seem multi-layered: with the act of storytelling she extends her situation and creates an identity that is polyvocal. By the term polyvocality I mean the recognition of different narrative voices, which, although seemingly independent and unmerged, are all inherent in the same narrator, Frederica. With polyvocality, Frederica invents other selves or alter egos which she shuffles “like a pack of cards in [her] head” (1). She acknowledges the habit of making up stories, but treats the embedded stories with uncertainty, keeping an epistemological suspense concerning them.

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4 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 74.

Roberts's use of the embedded narrative technique creates a rather Orlandoish character; a self which is not static and discrete but evolving. Hélène Cixous describes the nature of woman as a person who "does not cling to herself; she is dispersible, prodigious, stunning, desirous and capable of others, of the other woman that she will be, of the other woman she isn't, of him, of you."<sup>5</sup> The endlessness of the embedded cyclic narration and its explicit function as a force of transformation allow Frederica to become capable of formulating herself in her own terms. The multiplication of voices in the novel stands as a symbol for the expansion of the individual who is *capable of others*. By crossing the boundaries of the personal, Frederica enriches herself. The loose collage of narration provides a multiplicity that enables Frederica to explore herself and to recognize the Other(s) within. Thus, Frederica is able to pursue an identity that is perceived as being heterogeneous and not easy to determine.

#### METAMORPHOSIS

In the opening sentence, the reader is informed that the narrator, Fred, is on the run: "An hour after murdering my mother I was in Soho" (1). The narrator retrospectively tells about this day, using homodiegetic narration and internal focalization. Due to homodiegetic narration, the narrator's sex is not revealed. Fred's sex is clarified in the retrospectively narrated second chapter when Freddy, Fred's ten-year-old self, unfolds the experiences of her first period. By suggesting a focus on gender uncertainty, Roberts widens the definition of fixed gender roles, a concept that I will discuss later regarding Georgina's character.

Fred's metamorphosis commences in Madame Lesley's shop: "That was where it began. In the dress shop in Greek Street. In the changing room" (1). In the following narration, an analepsis takes place; a temporal distortion between the time pattern of the story and the time pattern of the fabula is created. Fred is on the run, loafing along Old Compton Street after killing her mother. She is wandering around in the streets to "spin away time," but the "sudden cool" (2) and the heavy rain force her to look for shelter. She enters Madame Lesley's gown shop, and a meticulous description begins: "The shop intrigued me," narrates

5 Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), qtd in Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 115.

Fred, “[a] relic from times past stocked with evening wear for dowagers, cast-offs for theatricals, rich-pickings for fancy-dress parties. A magpie haul of beaded, braided, embroidered slips and cocktail frocks [...] A glorious mix of diamanté and ostrich features, flowered *crepe de chine* and pin-ticked lawn” (4). The reader can almost physically perceive the confusion and sensuality of colors, textures, and smells. Fred succumbs to the experience of the overflowing patterns and textures in the shop. She soon comes across an “irresistible” salmon color chiffon dress, which becomes her “savior,” her “disguise” (4), and her “second skin” (5). Being concealed in a loose coat, heavy boots, and jeans, Fred chooses the irresistible dress and claims it as her disguise. The text here alludes to the multiple layers of clothing: with the nice dress, Fred presents her new identity to the world. Her new set of self-definition emerges when she sets her foot in the fitting room, formerly introduced as the place “where it began” (1). In the dressing room, Fred gets rid of the men’s clothing: the too big and heavy boots, the jeans, and the loose jacket. However, the reader is informed about her reason for wearing men’s clothing only in the final chapter: we learn that Fred escapes from her parents’ harassing criticism about carrying her illegitimate child by putting on men’s clothing. By this temporary disguise, she enables herself to change into someone else: she claims to put on a disguise so that someone else can “feel the bite and sting of those words but not [her]” (174). “My flesh was branded with those words for everyone to see, I had to cover myself with a man’s clothes then run” (174), she narrates. The men’s clothing conceals her features and physical characteristics and helps her avoid the harsh words “branding” her flesh. The primary aim of her disguise is to cover her identity with a second, exterior one, which has a different set of characteristics and traits. Not only does the disguise obscure her personality underneath, it ultimately allows her to break away from her authoritative parents, as well as the conventions of society. By taking the male clothing off in Madame Lesley’s shop, Fred prepares her body to put on her new pink chiffon dress, a “second skin” (5), which gives her a “new and beautiful self” (5). The new frock allows her a space to act, a new but familiar self; a self that is free from naming and shines out. That is, the dressing room serves as a metaphor: a space where identity can change with the clothing in which one displays oneself. In the changing room, Fred passes from physical disguise to a much more elaborate dance of identity, disguise, and self; she expands her situation into different histories through embedded narration. Madame Lesley’s shop provides a place

where Fred can express herself. In addition, Madame Lesley serves as an audience, ready to be amused by the stories Fred is about to share: “Tell me about it, [Madame Lesley] said: while I do the fitting” (6). Thus, Frederica decides to take the role of storyteller and intercalates other stories in her narration.

#### WORN IDENTITY

Throughout the novel, there are frequent references to subtle clothing details, garments, and textures. The close attention to details and nuances of fabric raises an awareness of clothing as something that offers a possibility for both disguise and expression of identity. Both Frederica and Georgina disguise their bodies by wearing men’s clothing.

The emergence of the unorthodox clothing choice of the character Georgina reveals much about the social norms governing appearances. In the chapters “Félicité” and “Georgina,” we read the story of a nineteenth-century English painter, Georgina. The young Georgina, “influenced by the movement for dress reform” (161), abandons “the fashionable clothes her father loved to have made for her, which constrained and emphasized her breasts and waist, her stomach and hips, which required corsets and stays and tight bodices” (162), and instead she chooses to wear “loose clothes in muslin and linen and chintz,” “overalls and smocks, wraps that she could fling on and off in a second” (162). Historically speaking, many artists who were influenced by the British Aesthetic and Arts and Crafts Movements “encouraged women to adopt artistic dress”<sup>6</sup> in order to improve beauty and health. The new style of dress was “associated with historicism;” it was “deemed exotic, and thus appropriate for fantasy dress, fancy dress, masquerade, fêtes, and intimate clothing.”<sup>7</sup> The new dressing style was taken up by different artistic circles during the 1860s and 1870s before gaining widespread notoriety in the 1880s, therefore carrying potential to signify a range of cultural values: “Many of the original values and aims of the first Aesthetic dressers were appropriated, adulterated, or reframed by competing interests and social groups,” that eventually led to

6 Patricia A. Cunningham, *Reforming Women’s Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2003), p. 103.

7 Cunningham, p. 103.

the emergence of the “New Woman,” argues Wahl.<sup>8</sup> The new style of garments was “a release from uncomfortable and unhealthy clothing.”<sup>9</sup> Wahl’s work reveals that Aesthetic garments were seen as a way to change personal and social perceptions about the role and function of femininity. Not only did the dress reflect a more comfortable and liberating way of existing, but was also a move toward gender equality. As a protest against Victorian fashion, Georgina changes the uncomfortable and unhealthy clothes and takes up an alternative sartorial trend found in artistic circles that formed a unique and creative style outside the norm. Arguing for the freedom of movement, comfort, and practicality, these garments allow Georgina to express herself, and she chooses to wear loose clothes made of natural materials. Occasionally, she puts on baggy, black velvet trousers “gathered at the ankle” in which she can forget altogether what she is wearing while she is smoking a Turkish cigarette (162). The Aesthetic dressing style liberates Georgina both physically and symbolically from the strictness of socially-defined womanhood. Wahl argues for the empowering practice the Aesthetic dressing had for women “by investigating its potential across categorical boundaries to address, subvert, or otherwise challenge facets of mainstream Victorian culture that were limiting or oppressive for women.”<sup>10</sup> With this understanding, Georgina’s decision to follow the movement becomes a liberating act, since it enables her to see herself as a strong, competent individual with power over her own life. The new way of clothing provides a set of means for her to comprehend her body differently than traditional womanly models have allowed, and present a feasible model of respectable corporeality, this way providing a stronger and more vigorous view of the female body as opposed to the submissive ideal; an entire freedom of expression in respect of dressing, as well as mode of living.

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8 Kimberly Wahl, *Dressed as in a Painting: Women and British Aestheticism in an Age of Reform* (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2013), p. xii.

9 Barbara Ryan, *Feminism and the Women’s Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement Ideology and Activism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 18.

10 Wahl, p. xii.

## DARING MASQUERADE

The idea that clothing contributes to identity is further suggested in the novel when, to gain admission into a masculine group in France, Georgina decides to dress herself in men's garments. Introducing herself as George, a young English painter, Georgina succeeds: she is able to manipulate the perceptions of her surroundings. Georgina's disguise is a "daring masquerade" (156), and she has a different objective than Frederica has when putting on men's clothes to escape from her parents' harassment. With cross-dressing, Georgina aims for deception, and it helps her achieve her desire: to rise to fame. The traditionally accepted female roles are limiting for Georgina, but cross-dressing provides an outlet for her to act outside of the accepted behavior. By focusing on the separation between the corporeal and the acted gender, the performative aspect of gender is revealed. Cross-dressing effectively discloses the pre-conditioned nature of gender identities with their socially established sets of meanings.

Georgina's character is depicted in an imaginary scenario: "One more illusion of reality" (157), another embedded story in the chapter "Georgina." The anonymous narrator reveals how Georgina embarks upon a masquerade in which she allows herself to have two, or rather three, selves: she lives her life as a woman painter in London and as a man painter in France, and her two separate and different existences are linked together "by the to-ing and fro-ing between them" (156). Georgina's engagement in the practice of cross-dressing in France becomes an extension of her everyday Aesthetic dress style practiced in England: "Dressing as a man was almost simply an extension of how she dressed every day as a student painter" (162). The conscious choice and application of Aesthetic dresses mark the beginning of Georgina's liberation. However, she can only experience the power of clothing when appareled in men's clothes; it is then that she discovers a new way of being: "Like George Sand before her, she found that men's clothes meant that she was not accosted when she roamed around by herself at night" (162). She puts on male clothes at first in order to protect herself from male sexual desire, but ultimately to participate in a masculine social group. When working in Étretat, she becomes part of a male group of painters, this way escaping the socially defined limitations imposed on nineteenth-century women artists. Disguised, she is not treated differently among men; nobody puts her in her place or offers her unsolicited advice (162). She can "tip back her chair, crack jokes, smoke cigarettes, eat

and drink what she like[s], and advance strong opinions" (163) without any consequences. Male clothing as artifact *creates* Georgina's behavior through its capacity to empower her to assert a new social identity. However, the empowering force of a male disguise reveals the boundaries of both female and male identities. Her masculinity is realized not only through physical presentation, clothing, and hairstyle, but through behavior as well. When dressing herself in men's clothing, as George, (s)he imitates a pre-existing performance that has already been determined in advance.

Judith Butler argues that gender performative acts may appear ostensibly as personal choices, but they always work within a shared social structure.<sup>11</sup> Following Butler's argument, which implies the rejection of the notion that gender comes from any internal essence or predetermined structure of being, Georgina's gender-reversal can be seen as an intentional and performative act. It is an action that serves to verify the binary of male and female, the masculine and feminine characteristics. In this sense, her performance actually reinforces ideologically polarized gender roles. The act of cross-dressing also unlocks new habits for Georgina: a list of various masculine gendered acts that constitute the era's very idea of maleness. She deconstructs these masculine gendered acts to reveal how they are created and naturalized by the repetition and reiteration of certain behaviors and actions. Seeking to approximate a masculine subjectivity, her act is a copy as it is in accord with an existing framework of cultural sanctions and prescriptions. By accommodating masculinity, she embraces a "phallic identification:" in Lacanian terms, the phallus is constituted by the relationship between the signifier of prevailing male attributes and the signified, meaning the sociocultural concept of masculinity.<sup>12</sup> That is, while disguising herself as a man, Georgina gains the status and significance traditionally attached to maleness; as a cross-dresser, she claims the cultural signifier of masculinity as her own. She manages to transfer ownership or possession of the phallus to her own subjectivity while cross-dressed, thus acquiring the privileges and social status usually reserved

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11 Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (1988), 519-531.

12 For Lacan's conceptualization of the phallus and the lack of the phallus, see Jacques Lacan, "The Signification of the Phallus," in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2006), 575-584.

for men. By doing so, Georgina utilizes “identificatory mobility:”<sup>13</sup> her lack of difficulty in assuming different gender roles illustrates the issue of performativity. Her gender identity moves from one gendered discourse to the other, alternately conforming to their structures. Defining herself as a man, her tall lean body becomes the Other: George. “Her truth was a trick performed in the darkness of the Ladies’ Cabin of the overnight boat to France” (157). It is then George who strolls up and down the deck, a “young English fellow” (158), before mooring in France. Georgina’s skirt becomes a man’s coat in France “worn by a shabby painter, and attract[s] not one glance” (157). She puts on tightly fitting pants with great enjoyment: “such pleasure to feel the cloth of the trousers tight across her pelvis, over her hips. To be held in by trousers was to be both caressed and confined. Trousers outlined her shape and gave back herself” (157). By diminishing diversity between the genders, Georgina presents the multi-layeredness of clothing; she reuses her long skirt as a men’s coat, thereby changing its purpose. By dissecting masculinity into a series of behaviors and gestures that can be learned by a female subject just as easily, Georgina adapts to specific social expectations. Her masculine performance is effective; she successfully exposes the constructed nature of patriarchal masculinity, but at the same time she subverts the category of gender identity by subtly reworking it. Therefore, cross-dressing provides Georgina a way to circumvent society without coming out in actual rebellion.

The disguise not only gives her an *entrée* into the “masculine world she admire[s] as superior” (163), but also creates different opportunities for action. By presenting a new identity to the world, she redefines her personality. She produces new frames and new sets of relationships; therefore, cross-dressing becomes a rebirth, a renewal, and a discovery of formerly unknown and/or not played-out aspects of herself. With gender disguise, she is able to expand her identity by discovering the power to evade and alter. She realizes that because gender identity is constructed through acts, there exists a possibility to construct a different gender by a different series of acts. Through the double role and disguise, we see a self that is complex and elusive.

During the periods Georgina spends cross-dressed as a male painter, she is removed from the limited female subject position, allowing her to develop into an independent, decisive, and self-determining subject. Cross-dressing, just as

13 I use the term *identificatory mobility* after Kirsten Campbell, *Jacques Lacan and Feminist Epistemology* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 94.



storytelling in the case of Frederica, becomes the means through which a woman can achieve a self-determining and reflective identity. If, as Butler claims, identity is located within practices of signification, and all signification takes place “within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat,”<sup>14</sup> then Georgina gains selfhood by subverting the conventional practices of gender signification. Her performance highlights the constructed nature of gender stereotypes, and, ultimately, she manages to destabilize both masculinity and femininity as previously stable categories of identity. Georgina never stops being a woman; she creates her masculine identity in order to express an essential aspect of her identity. She consequently achieves agency by disrupting the ways in which society naturalizes the relationship between sex and gender. Her cross-dressing disturbs the behavioral repetitions of conventional categories of both genders, thereby producing a unique identity that challenges the limiting boundaries of traditional male and female roles. Georgina’s self-conscious reflection on the nature of gender itself, which admits the frailty of prevailing gender norms and questions the validity of their imposition on individuals, develops a self-determining subjectivity that is resistant to the ideological discourses which seek to constrain and prescribe. By the playful and temporary liberation from the socio-cultural norms and expectations, Georgina manages to legitimize the Other within herself, and finds a way, however clandestine it is, to achieve liberation from the traditional feminine gender role.

#### DESIRED PERFECTION

As a painter, Georgina challenges the norms of a gender binary through non-normative, androgynous depiction. Her capacity of masquerade and transgression is best realized in one of her paintings, her *Self-Portrait*: positioning her as an object that oscillates between the sexes, the painting emphasizes her “indeterminate gender” (158) through the loose, lightweight overgarment smock, her short, severely brushed-back hair, and also her signature, G. Mannot. All of these features indicate ambivalence and a wish for challenging traditional gender ideals. That is, not only with cross-dressing does Georgina dismantle gender by

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<sup>14</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 145.

separating expressions of gender from perceptions of biological sex but also with the androgynous depiction of her self-portrait. The painting asserts liberation from gender prejudice; it does not constitute an effeminate man or a masculine woman since it cannot be defined along the terms of masculinity and femininity. It constructs a person whose gender is uncertain. In her art, Georgina unites the two genders so successfully that they become practically interchangeable with each other: “we see her as a woman because in England [...] she was known as a woman painter” (158), but in France the painting is seen as the self-portrait of the male painter. The picture is a miscellany of the presentation and characteristics which construct masculinity and femininity, and as such it transgresses the traditional delimitation between the sexes. But gender reality can only take place when there is performance: “it is real only to the extent that it is performed.”<sup>15</sup> The painting as a static object is without gender performativity; it has no actual performative action within the social sphere. Consequently, such androgynous perfection can only be achieved in a work of art: androgyny can be understood rather as a philosophical and social utopian ideal than a desired objective. It cannot be represented within the dichotomous gender discourse because it is a concept that annihilates binary categorization. As such, it needs to be created in the realm of art. Although Georgina widens definitions of her feminine reality by examining ways in which the masculine principle is included, it is only her artwork where she can offer initiation into a more open, non-categorized space.

Roberts creates a multiplicity of identity to acknowledge the Other in the self. Georgina acquires “two bodies, apparently separate and different, male and female, which were joined together by the to-ing and fro-ing between them. One skin stitched to the other then ripped off, over and over again” (156). Georgina manages to flourish in both roles, she *marries* both her male and female identity parts, thus making a commitment to the different roles and also creating a bond by joining them: “She made herself into a marriage. She married two split parts of herself, drew them together and joined them, and she also let each one flourish individually” (156). Therefore, I argue, a third kind of existence emerges, quasi-independent of the two conventional genders. The male and female roles are flourishing individually, but they are not offered up for fusion or eradication. The experience of identity in a world in which boundaries are being crossed produces

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15 Butler, “Performative Acts,” p. 527.

an ultimate identity: a self that is positioned closer to the borderline of genders, not in order to remain there, but to undergo oscillation.

In a prayer in the last chapter, Frederica the storyteller promises her baby not to harm, burden, or bruise her: “a prayer for my daughter that I shall be able to contain her grows, inside me and outside me [...] not to bind or fetter her but to see her as she is, [...] to love her with imagination and plenty” (175). Frederica’s pregnant body can be seen as a direct experience of Otherness within, pointing toward a new conception: her expression of a visionary hunger for a more perfect social order gives birth to a new story characterized by liberation, possibility, and potential. Roberts presents an opening of the self to the Other by widening the definitions of identity, self, and gender through the characters of Georgina and Frederica. However, at the end of the novel she leaves it open to other women, other storytellers: “So we walked back through Soho and into the next story:” (175) – the novel ends, just like the chapters in it, without traditional closure, hereby offering a continuation of further stories of women’s lives.

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EVA HANNA

## *Guidos, Geordies, and Gender* On the Potential for Subversion in Reality Television

In 1997, writing to fellow feminist scholar Rita Alfonso, American philosopher Jo Triglio expressed her concerns about the elitist power relations present in talking about oppression. Seeing how feminist philosophy was moving in the direction of ever-more difficult, jargonistic, and specialized language, she believed it was becoming the product of the “privileged few”<sup>1</sup> definitively outside of the realm of and inaccessible to the minorities and lower classes. The fact that some of the works considered to be the most foundational to the field of gender studies adhere to the aforementioned criteria only serves to further prove this point. To counter this current, I would like to propose a sustained analysis of contemporary pop-cultural phenomena in order to examine what they mean not only to the general public who watches them, but to the field of gender studies as well. In my opinion, although certain works that are perceived as high-brow have academic relevance, we often overlook the processes and mechanisms influencing the actual lives of millions of people, the ones firmly outside of academia. Such processes are occasionally recorded and subsequently analyzed by scholars working

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1 In their article, Rita Alfonso and Joe Triglio argue that feminism seems to be headed more towards becoming an academic construction than anything else. According to them, grassroots activism and the more relatable writing of the previous decades seem to have made way for abstract theories and feminist metaphilosophy. See Rita Alfonso and Jo Triglio, “Surfing the Third Wave: A Dialogue between Two Third Wave Feminists,” *Hypatia* 12.3 (1997), 7-16, p. 11.

within the field of cultural or film studies, but their findings are all too often classified as *banal* or *trivial*.

This paper will deal with the issue of the perceived banality of analyzing so-called *trash TV* by showcasing how the televised performance of gender in both *Geordie Shore* and *Jersey Shore* could potentially have a real-life impact on millions of viewers' ideas of masculinity and femininity: on what it means to be a gendered individual in postmodern America or England. Such an analysis could be seen as supplementing the body of work so heavily critiqued by Trigilio and Alfonso: the current, well-established canon of essential works on gender as exemplified by authors such as Butler, Barad, and Kosofsky Sedgwick, amongst others. Just as well-known for their groundbreaking ideas on gender as they are for their exclusivist and increasingly complex style of writing, modern-day scholars who have the capacity to engage with such texts are but a select group of people educated in a specific way; understanding and exploring these works is not exactly open to feminists at large. Diametrically opposed to these works is the world of reality television – a quintessential example of quick-and-easy to consume entertainment and source of information.

*Jersey Shore* was an MTV-based, loosely scripted reality show that focused on the lives of nine young people from New Jersey. They were put together in a house and given unlimited alcohol and money to spend on trips and activities while being followed around by cameras everywhere they went. Their antics were broadcast worldwide, which quickly resulted in media criticism and a huge fan base. Within a year's time, *Jersey Shore* was renewed for multiple seasons and became the basis for successful spin-offs in many other countries.<sup>2</sup> I have chosen to focus solely on *Jersey Shore* (2009–2012, Salsano, Jeffress, and French) and *Geordie Shore* (2011–present, Readwin, Regan, and Reynolds); while *Jersey* was the original that set something wholly new into motion, the *Geordies* seem to be the most strikingly

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2 Examples of spin-offs include *The Valleys*, *Oh Oh Cherso*, *Warsaw Shore*, and *Acapulco Shore*. Although there are huge regional variations in and among these shows, all of them can be characterized as working-class people in their early twenties talking about going on “the trip of a lifetime.” All of these people, in the wake of *Jersey Shore*'s success, hope this will make them famous. Furthermore, each series focuses on a specific region that is well known within the country it is broadcast in: *Geordie Shore* is about people from Newcastle-upon-Tyne (*Geordies*), *Oh Oh Cherso* features people from the Hague and especially Scheveningen in the Netherlands, and the Spanish *Gandía Shore* shows us the nightlife of Valencia. *Jersey Shore* is the only show that stereotypically portrays an ethnic minority, the Italian-American *Guidos*.

non-conformist. I will use both shows to illustrate my two-fold argument: firstly, that there is social and academic relevance in analyzing these phenomena because they influence a diverse and expansive audience while reflecting the public's views, desires, points of reference, and identificatory processes. Secondly, I believe these programs can be characterized by fluid displays of gender identity, based on how many of its stars are involved in processes of gender role reversal (whether consciously or unconsciously). Combining these two points, I would like to argue that such subtle reversals, reflecting the Italian-American *Guido* and the Newcastle *Geordie* subcultural communities out of which these youngsters have emerged, have an influence on their target audiences' understanding of what it means to be masculine or feminine. In other words: these shows have (gender)subversive potential. To illustrate this, I will first briefly explain the concept of gender. After this, I will argue that programs such as *Jersey Shore* and *Geordie Shore* should be seen as worthy of academic interest, followed by an analysis of the series based on three distinct subcategories: sex, one's physical appearance, and the household. The paper will end with a brief summing-up of my findings.

#### GENDER, (DIS)IDENTIFICATION, AND THE DIVINEY ORDAINED BINARY

Before moving on to a discussion of gendered representations in the media and the subsequent gender role reversal I argue is taking place, let us first look at the concept of gender itself. My description of gender is rooted in three foundational or fundamental works within the field of gender studies: Ann Oakley's 1972 *Sex, Gender and Society*,<sup>3</sup> Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman's *Doing Gender* from 1987,<sup>4</sup> and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks's 2011 *Gender in History*.<sup>5</sup>

While we take on many different roles throughout our lives and in various social situations, the male/female category seems to be something we can never shake off. In this scenario, *sex* is a descriptive biological term while *gender* is a psychological and cultural term pertaining to social values. It is connected to the

3 Ann Oakley, "Sex and Gender," in *Sex, Gender and Society* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1972), 158-172.

4 Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, "Doing Gender," *Gender & Society* 1.2 (1987), 125-151.

5 Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, "Introduction," in *Gender in History: Global Perspectives* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 1-20.



realm of expectations and behavioral rules we attach to the meaning of being either a man or a woman, and can vary across cultures and over time. “Gender identity” is a person’s “psychosexual orientation,” the sense he/she has of being male/female, of belonging to a certain group.<sup>6</sup> Heteronormative society considers a person to be normal if their sex correlates with their gender, and we are led to believe that this should always be the case.

Gender is seen by West and Zimmerman and many others as a continuous accomplishment striven for by people whose competences in society depend on the successful enactment of this identity.<sup>7</sup> *Doing* gender is unavoidable and is guided by strict rules and expectations; it is interactional, a situated doing, carried out in the presence of others who are taught to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate gender performance. Certain identificatory displays are used to secure one’s place in one of either categories of gender, and these displays open us up to scrutiny from those around us. Meanwhile, although gender is a continuous enactment and performance, these processes are seen as natural. Here, *natural* means something like divinely ordained, the way it is meant to be, something that can and should never change. An expression of gender is taken to be part of the person’s essential nature, which should always fit into the socially created and enforced gender binary. Constructing, performing, and subsequently solidifying this binary as natural has implications for the arrangements of our social life, as certain distinctions coded as natural will be used to legitimize hierarchies, power struggles, and oppression against particular groups and individuals. The resulting social order that emerges out of these hierarchies reinforces these societally legitimated and oppressive systems, which means that we as individuals will reap certain societal benefits if we successfully *do* gender. In complying, we simultaneously “sustain, reproduce and render legitimate the[se] institutional arrangements.”<sup>8</sup>

In most Western societies, this gender-based social order classifies men as strong, void of emotions, rational, and wise, while women are taken to be guided by their emotions, to be nurturing and motherly. A whole set of expectations accompanies such rigid binary thinking, encompassing realms such as sexuality,

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6 The foundations of the division between “sex,” “gender,” and “gender identity” come from Oakley, p. 159.

7 West and Zimmerman, p. 126.

8 West and Zimmerman, p. 146.

one's appearance, aspirations, talents, and predispositions. While most blatantly sexist thought patterns and gender role divisions have slowly made way for more egalitarian thinking, girls and boys are still expected to grow up to be either feminine or masculine, respectively; any behavior that cannot easily be equated with the clichés that have formed around these identities are quickly seen as suspicious or odd. Furthermore, whenever a job or chore needs to be done, most members of such a society are quick to classify these tasks according to gender: the home is still essentially seen as the realm of the woman while the man roams around freely in the outside world to provide for the others. Here, television shows such as *Jersey Shore* provide us with a powerful alternative to the, perhaps subconscious, status quo, as they blatantly ignore and subvert gendered roles and ideals.

#### WHY JERSEY SHORE AND GEORDIE SHORE?

#### WHAT CAN THEY TEACH US ABOUT GENDER?

Over time, it has become increasingly clear that television serves as a transmitter of culture; it instills in viewers certain ideals, values, and behaviors that communicate to them how to participate in their broader communities.<sup>9</sup> Whereas certain cultural norms and conventions are passed down to us by our parents, teachers, and friends, mass media presents us with tangible examples of how ideal citizens go about their lives. It is based on processes of representation and subsequent repetition, which cumulatively have an effect on our ideas of what we should (aspire to) be. This is what George Gerbner lays out in his Cultivation Theory: watching TV “over time will be associated with holding [certain views] of a specific and distinct [kind of] reality.”<sup>10</sup> In the hands of the people who write, control, and produce programs, television becomes an important political tool to shape public opinion. This shaping of public opinion, as previously mentioned,

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9 George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, and Nancy Signorielli, “Charting the Mainstream: Television’s Contributions to Political Orientations,” *Journal of Communication* 32.2 (1982), 100–127.

10 Brooke Swift, “MTV’s *Jersey Shore*: An Educator on Interpersonal Relationships, Gender Roles and Embracing Manhood,” thesis (Pforzheimer Honors College, 2012), *DigitalCommons@Pace*, accessed 9 May 2016, p. 6.

makes certain things seem natural or divinely ordained – and this is exactly what happens with the carefully planned-out televised portrayals of gendered behavior.

In terms of gender, Western European and American media have a long-standing tradition of perpetrating certain stereotypes.<sup>11</sup> Men in these movies and shows are typically depicted as strong, rational, and wise – views that correlate with the characteristics that society has ascribed to the male sex for eons. Women, diametrically opposed to men, are shown to be emotional, passionate, and impulsive.<sup>12</sup> As claimed by West and Zimmerman in their groundbreaking work on sex and gender, these depictions are not so much consequences of our “essential sexual natures” as they are portrayals of what we want to convey about them.<sup>13</sup> The depiction is a socially scripted dramatization of society’s idealized views of the male/female dichotomy, reinforcing the dominant discourse that is meant to legitimize certain power structures based on inequality. In an understanding of gender as an ongoing achievement created through everyday interaction, we see how *difference* is not so much reflected by avenues of popular culture as it is created by them. On television, in magazines, and through social media, certain messages about desired gendered behavior are encoded, and our lifelong exposure to such messages makes sure we decode these signs in an appropriate manner. Rather than seeing realistic portrayals of a diverse range of people, we see these images as examples, as models to emulate. The differences between the two genders are played out and shown to be diametrically opposed, with only two possible gender identities being even remotely acceptable. By these images being all-encompassing, we automatically assume these differences are real: our adherence to the expectations raised by the media and our compliance with them once again reinforce the fabricated binary structure of our society, thus making the carefully planned-out and advertised version of people an actuality. It is a vicious cycle in which media portrayals provide us with role models to emulate – our copying

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11 Will Dermietzel, “The Objectification and Gender Stereotyping of Men and Women in Film and Television,” (2013), *Shadowlocked*, accessed 7 May 2016.

12 Examples of strong, rational men versus emotional and impulsive women are numerous: from the unnamed protagonist and Marla Singer in *Fight Club* to anything related to *James Bond*, to Claire and Bender in *The Breakfast Club* and Pumpkin and Honey Bunny in *Pulp Fiction*, right down to Gloria and Jay in *Modern Family*, virtually all of the male characters in *The Big Bang Theory* versus Penny and Charlie with every single one-night stand (including his stalker neighbor Rose) in *Two and a Half Men*.

13 West and Zimmerman, pp. 130-132.

this behavior leads to the media portrayals becoming a reality. And by bringing an idealized version of gendered behavior into the real world, the social structure that was planned out by ad campaigns becomes an actuality.

Although it might feel like televised depictions of men and women have been modernized in terms of moving away from the nuclear-family-as-center-of-the-television-series, the stereotypical invocation of *essential nature* can still be found in a wide range of programs. In my opinion, shows such as *Jersey Shore* and *Geordie Shore* are hard at work challenging long-held televised stereotypes of both men and women. While still battling out gender within a mainstream heteronormative framework, they show subtle and varied alternatives to the status quo. Around the world, millions of young, impressionable viewers tune in weekly to see their favorite role models, and some of these characters' habits are bound to have a real-life impact on members of their audience. This potential influence alone should be enough reason to take such phenomena seriously.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, besides the effects that such shows could eventually have on their viewers over time, their mere existence already teaches us some fundamental truths about society. On the one hand, if the characters depicted in these series are real people picked from a subcultural group and they all have certain gender non-conformist characteristics in common, this points towards certain trends among certain groups that are not just individual deviations from the norm. On the other hand, if these series are scripted, they will reflect the direction that the writers and producers want the show to go in. The willingness, or perhaps even the carefully laid out plan, to showcase characters like the ones presented in *Jersey Shore* and *Geordie Shore* already shows more of an openness towards certain kinds of fluidity in depicting gendered individuals. If television is a means to transmit culture and to instill in viewers certain ideas and beliefs, then showing a group of men and women who do not conform to societally prescribed idealizations of their gendered roles is a conscious decision and a subversive act in and of itself.

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14 Over the course of 6 seasons, *Jersey Shore* had an average viewership of 6.03 million viewers per season premiere and 5.54 million viewers per season finale. The show was especially popular with viewers between 18-49 years old, often topping the charts of this age demographic at their popularity peak. *Geordie Shore*'s ratings have also consistently been high, with around 1 million viewers per episode as of season 5; this makes it one of the most popular British television shows at the moment. See "Jersey Shore Ratings," *TV By The Numbers*, Zap2it, accessed 18 May 2016; and Simon Duke, "A Definitive Guide to *Geordie Shore* Ahead of the Launch of Series 10," *ChronicleLive*, accessed 19 May 2016.

Moreover, the main motivations for watching these programs provide us with two opposing yet interconnected insights into public opinion. The first, most common reason for watching such shows is purely their entertainment value. The audience looks at these characters with amazement, finding them ridiculous and their behavior shameful; in a way, this could be seen as the 21st-century equivalent of a Coney Island freak show. The bearded lady is replaced by the drunk, slutty girl who cannot keep her pants on after a few drinks, the actual three-legged man by the symbolic one. Our alienation from these people classified as abnormal oddities illuminates exactly what it is that we do think is normal. If viewers disidentify with these girls because they sleep around, that means female monogamy is considered to be the norm. If we ridicule the *Jersey Shore*-boys for wearing lip-gloss, this means a rejection of beauty products should be standard male practice. Social norms are both reflected and produced in such a discourse, and the ways in which various groups have tried to ban the broadcasting of these shows only serves to show us how we police other people's behaviors and how invested we are in normality and non-deviation.

The second reason for watching these shows is admiration and identification, the ways in which the audience sees the people on television as *of their own kind*. If this is the case, then this could be indicative of the spread of these characters' behavioral patterns outside of their designated subcultural space, pointing towards broader trends that could eventually have a substantial impact on our communities and societies. Both reasons provide us with proof that there is actually something happening, even if we are still unsure of what that is; the seeds of subversion and transformation have been planted.

#### INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

*Jersey Shore* was a 2009-2012 MTV production. It followed a group of supposedly Italian-Americans in their early twenties, part of a loose-knit larger subcultural group often denoted as *Guidos* (or *Guidettes* for women), while they spend a summer partying at the Jersey Shore. The crew of eight members was picked by MTV executives after a long casting process, during which the producers looked for the perfect mix of "candor, honesty, boldness and a very combustible, chaotic mess. You

could honestly say none of these people were traditionally beautiful.”<sup>15</sup> Eventually, they settled on Snooki (Nicole Polizzi, 22, a clumsy girl with a drinking problem), Angelina (Pivarnick, 23, the self-proclaimed “Kim Kardashian of Staten Island”), The Situation (Mike Sorrentino, 27, an aspiring model), Pauly D (Paul DelVecchio, 29, a DJ hoping to make it big), Vinny (Vincenzo Guadagnino, 22, who only signed up because he thought the program was a joke), Sammi Sweatheart (Samantha Giancola, 22), Ronny (Ronald Ortiz-Magro, 24, a body-builder), and JWoww (Jennifer Farley, 23, a non-Italian who still looked and acted exactly like a true *Guidette*). Pivarnick was quickly replaced by Deena (Nicole Cortese, 22, a long-time friend of Snooki’s who often describes herself as “bicurious” and “a blast in a glass”) after repeatedly getting into fights with the other housemates. For the first season, the cast was placed in a luxurious home close to the Jersey Boardwalk; later seasons were filmed in South Beach, Florida and Florence, Italy. Upon airing, the series was heavily critiqued because of the stereotypical depiction of Italian-Americans and appropriation of the Guido subculture, the fact that not all cast members were fully Italian, and that none of them were originally from the Shore-area at all. Furthermore, the binge-drinking, wild partying, and sexual prowess of both the men and the women made the series an easy target for concerned parents and conservative media outlets. However, despite the initial backlash, *Jersey Shore* became one of the most-watched contemporary television shows. The cast became enormously famous, which led to them allegedly being paid over \$150,000 per episode as of the final season.<sup>16</sup> This popularity also ensured them continued success with spin-off shows such as *Snooki & Jwoww* (2012-2015), product endorsements (for protein powder, bronzing lotions, and hair extension ranges), and guest appearances on most prominent American talk shows. Furthermore, the *Jersey Shore*-format was exported to countries like England (*Geordie Shore*, discussed below), Wales (*The Valleys*), Poland (*Warsaw Shore*), and the Netherlands (*Oh Oh Cherso*). What is so remarkable about the format’s success is the fact it is already so incredibly played out: from MTV’s own *The Real World* to *Big Brother* and *Temptation Island* – we have seen it all before. What sets *Jersey Shore* apart is not so much the well-known premise of following people around with cameras and forcing them to live in a luxurious house with a group of strangers, but the

15 Michael Schneider, “Jersey Shore: In Their Own Words,” *TV Guide*, accessed 7 May 2016.

16 Alexis Tereszczuk, “All That Partying Pays! You Won’t Believe What The Jersey Shore Cast Earns,” *Radar Online*, accessed 17 May 2016.

never-before-seen subcultures (such as the Guidos), the focus on regions that are often underrepresented in international media (*Geordie Shore*), and the ways in which all cast members of all international reincarnations of the show seem to live in excess in ways rarely seen before on television. From drinking to having sex to feuding with friends, *Jersey Shore* pushed the boundaries of a television sub-genre that already seemed to be as outrageous as humanly possible. The ways in which this series still dominates popular culture is equally surprising, which becomes especially obvious when looking at the many words and phrases coined by the cast members that are now commonly used both in the United States and abroad, showing its widespread and lasting influence on pop culture. Some of the most notable examples include “GTL” (Gym-Tanning-Laundry), “t-shirt time” (the few hours before going to a club during which the male cast members do their hair and put on their fanciest t-shirts), “fistpump” (a type of dance that revolves around pumping your fists into the air), “meatball” (a small, usually chubby girl), “grenade” (an ugly, obese girl surrounded by a group of hot friends. Here, one of the boys will have to “take one for the team”), and “landmine” (a skinny grenade).

Newcastle’s spin-off series *Geordie Shore* first started in 2011, and is now in its thirteenth eight-episode season. Named after the inhabitants of Newcastle, the Geordies, and their distinctive accents, the series gives us a look into the lives of these British counterparts of Snooki and co. The series essentially copied the American format in which eight young people are put together in a house and are urged to party in front of a camera crew, although the British group does not revolve around a specific ethnic minority. The characters are also more varied and not characteristically part of any subculture as the Guidos were. Furthermore, the cast has rotated much more than the American one. Here, we see Holly Hagan (18, who describes herself as “fun and flirty, with double Fs”), Gary “Gaz” Beadle (23, whose main claim to Newcastle fame was his bragging about sleeping with as many women as possible), James Tindale (20, a muscular hairdresser who believes doing his own hair was the hardest thing he has ever done), Charlotte Letitia-Crosby (20, the lovable “dumb blonde” who is often seen peeing herself), Greg Lake (26, a down-to-earth British version of *Jersey Shore*’s Vinny, who seems to be totally disconnected from the others in the group), Jay Gardner (25, the “papa bear” who holds the family together and tries to resolve all of the housemates’ arguments), Sophie Kasaei (who got kicked out of the show because of “racist remarks,” aged 21), and Vicky Pattison (the university-educated “Geordie V.I.P.”,

23). Similarly to *Jersey Shore*, the Geordies have made money from spin-offs such as *The Charlotte Crosby Experience* (2014) and *Ex on the Beach* (2014-), as well as from product endorsements and interviews. The Geordies have also popularized a particular kind of British slang,<sup>17</sup> which was sometimes so incomprehensible that TV stations broadcast them with subtitles.

This framing of the cast and their surroundings will hopefully lead to a clearer understanding of these series as I outline their gender-subversive acts, firmly based within the categories of sex, appearance, and the household.

## SEX

In the mainstream media as well as in daily life, there are numerous double standards. Some of the most pervasive ones seem to revolve around sexuality, such as the ones in which girls seeking pleasure are always “sluts” and boys always “studs.”<sup>18</sup> The blatant societal upholding of the Madonna/whore-complex (a construct that upholds a distinction between two types of women: one is admirable and one is sexually attractive. The “Madonna” is loved, while the “whore” is used or loathed) is still dominant, exerting its influence on girls of all ages in virtually every known society. Transgressing females are hardly ever portrayed in a positive light, especially on (reality) television, and any woman trying to own her sexuality runs the risk of being publicly ridiculed or called out on her behavior.

In *Jersey Shore*, something seems to be different. Just as the men try and sleep with as many different girls as they can, the girls do the same thing; in the big, almost sexually egalitarian *Jersey Shore*-universe, female sexual appetite is almost as unashamedly present as its male counterpart. JWovw is seen seducing random men on multiple occasions, Snooki brings people home to have sex with, and

<sup>17</sup> Some of the terms often used by the *Geordie Shore* cast have become immensely popular, such as “parsnip” (a big penis, usually when referring to fellow castmate Gary Beadle), “mortal” (drunk to the point of passing out), “tash on” (making out with someone), “forking” (having sex, in the sense that “spooning always leads to forking”), and “bellend” (dick, usually when referring to another person; can also be used for the body part). Many of these terms were already commonly used in the Tyneside area before the program aired, but the show has almost turned them into *Geordie Shore*-trademarks.

<sup>18</sup> For more discussions on sexual dichotomies and double standards, see Jessica Valenti, *He’s A Stud, She’s A Slut, and 49 Other Double Standards Every Woman Should Know* (Berkeley: Seal, 2008).



Sammi initiates sex with her boyfriend Ronnie. Furthermore, the format of the show does not make their activities seem as though there is something inherently shameful in their behavior; no judgmental background music, no sound effects, no commentary.<sup>19</sup> Although the show is, of course, highly edited, there is no narrator or presenter who comments on any of these acts. All of the sex, whether male-initiated or female-initiated, is presented in the same way. But not every sexual act is equal: there is still a clear demarcation. Women outside of *la famiglia* can be seen as whores, and are called out on their behavior. The Shore women classify other girls as whores too, which makes it even more surprising that they can engage in this behavior themselves. There seems to be an overall atmosphere of not caring what anyone thinks of them while simultaneously knowing that the outside world will constantly be judging.

*Geordie Shore* takes the notion of not judging sexual behaviors, appetites, or preferences even further, displaying a group of friends who do not differentiate between “sluts” and “non-sluts.” While the boys are out there “pulling birds,” the girls team up to make sure they do not get left behind; what ensues is a fierce competition (or “bang battle”) between the sexes. There are multiple montages in which Charlotte utters statements similar to this one: “I’m gonna get a penis in every single orifice in my body. Two in my eyeballs, two in the nostrils, two in each ear, one in the mouth, one in the bum hole, one in the fairy hole, one in the urethra and then one rubbing against the gooch.”<sup>20</sup> On more than one occasion, the girls either go to a sex shop or discuss the best kinds of vibrators. Refreshingly enough, female *Geordie Shore* discourse is all about pleasure; whether the girls

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19 A typical *Jersey Shore* conversation between the women goes something like this:

Deena: “Yo, I have a vibrator if you need it! I’m on a two-month dry spell. I haven’t had sex in two months. So...hopefully [fingers crossed]...I’ll find someone”.

Snooki: “Do you wanna see mine? I’ll show you mine”.

Deena: “Show me it! Do you have the rabbit?”

Snooki: “I call my vibrator the Elmo, because...Tickle-Me-Elmo, you know what I mean?”

Deena: “Yes!”

Snooki: “He’s green” [pulls out a small green vibrator]

Deena: “That’s it?”

Snooki: “Listen, honey. This shit does wonders.”

moreover, Snooki says during a confessional: “But you know I have Vinny in the house now, so maybe I don’t need the vibrator. We’ll see.” (*Jersey Shore*, 3.1)

20 *Geordie Shore*, 3.2.

get off or not is absolutely central.<sup>21</sup> Here, we have a group of young women who will not be slut-shamed by anyone, who are sexually active and totally unapologetic in a way rarely seen on television (or any other media outlet, for that matter).

This unapologetic acknowledging of their own sexual natures has been one of the main reasons why people think the program is disgusting and hurtful to viewers. Just like in the case of *Jersey Shore*, British organizations have tried to ban the series from being aired, or have urged worried parents not to let their children watch the show due to its “pornographic content.”<sup>22</sup> In reality, pornography is something made to excite an audience, to arouse someone else. What these women are doing is reclaiming their own pleasure, their own right to sexual freedom. The fact that there is such backlash against these actions only goes to show how scary and, indeed, subversive this is to their viewers.

#### APPEARANCE

There is a history in patriarchal societies of seeing women as narcissistic, appearance-obsessed creatures. For centuries, this view has been honed as a typically female disposition in cautionary tales, fables, novels, and movies, and is now so ingrained in our thought patterns that we associate any type of regard for appearance as a feminine trait. And how could we as gender-role-adhering individuals not, seeing as society continuously resorts to the reducing of women to nothing more than their bodies, when dominant discourse goes to great lengths to instill in us the fear of not looking attractive enough, when Photoshopped images raise the impossible bar even higher? The Beauty Myth is alive and well, starting early on in childhood and remaining with us for most of our lives. Women have been socialized into becoming ornamental objects; men are socialized to become their observers and admirers.<sup>23</sup> There is very little navigational space in between, these positions often being correlated to our innate, essential nature.

21 In season 6, episode 5, Sophie goes to a sex shop in Australia. Dissatisfied with the whole range of sex toys she has brought along, she utters the following phrase: “I’m bored of using vibrators, I’m bored of using cock rings, what I wanna get is bondage shit. Now *that* is what I’m talkin’ about.”

22 See, amongst others, “MTV’s Geordie Shore Upsets Locals,” *BBC News*, accessed 20 May 2016; and Kim Swan, “Fury over Geordie Shore TV Show Heads to Parliament,” *Chronicle Live*, accessed 22 May 2016.

23 West and Zimmerman, pp. 140–141.

*Jersey Shore* positions itself exactly within this confined space, at the intersections of masculinity and femininity. Here, it is not so much the women doing the gender subverting as the men, who are almost obsessed with their appearance. Weekly visits to the hairdresser are essential, going to the gym less than daily feels like defeat, and the tanning salon is seen as the ultimate way to treat themselves. What we see here is a cult of homosociality in which men encourage one another to look good, and are not afraid to train their friends into making them the best they can possibly be. Looking good is these boys' primary concern, and nothing will get in the way of their goals. It seems that gender becomes especially fluid here, as men appropriate certain behaviors that society has deemed either *feminine* or *gay*, with very few options in-between. Paradoxically enough, these practices make the men feel more masculine, highlighting how performative gender essentially is, and how we can only understand these performances as contingent and multiple. Unveiling these performances identifies gender as more of an achievement than a preexisting category,<sup>24</sup> which again highlights and underscores the artificiality of the binary masculine/feminine divide.

In an in-depth column about the aesthetics of the *Jersey Shore* men, Amanda A. Klein links these concerns about appearance to the ancient Italian principle of *bella figura*, or having to look good at all times and at any cost.<sup>25</sup> Maintaining the *bella figura* was seen as a subversive move to make lower-class men feel powerful in the early 1400s, when they were lacking money and education but making up for that in looks. Similar processes seem to be going on in Seaside Heights, where the boys' identification with Italian culture and their traditional upbringing has probably instilled upon them some sense of the importance of adhering to this *bella figura*-principle.<sup>26</sup> It allows them to take something that has been constructed as inherently feminine – the obsession with appearance – and use it as a signifier of (extreme) masculinity. This re-coding of behaviors is most clearly

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24 Amanda A. Klein, "Performing Gender and Ethnicity on the *Jersey Shore*," *The Judgmental Observer*, accessed 12 May 2016.

25 Klein.

26 This becomes apparent when observing Ronnie in the first episode of season 1. The cameras show him getting ready to drive off to the Jersey Shore as his voice-over says the following: "First impression is everything. Everywhere you go, you're always makin' a first impression on someone. The bank account can be low, but you always have to look good, always have to get a haircut, always have to have new sneakers, always have to look fresh." Meanwhile, we see montages of Ronnie applying lip-gloss and packing suitcases full of cologne and protein shakes for the trip.

seen when we look at Vinny, the only Guido who does not believe in weightlifting, tanning, or wearing lip-gloss. The other male cast members consider him to be effeminate for not wanting to “look good” – a signifier of weakness.<sup>27</sup>

In *Geordie Shore*, both men and women are similarly interested in looking good. The boys also visit the gym frequently, take care of their bodies, and would never want to be caught dead in the same outfit twice, while the women pile on extensions, fake nails, and spray-tans. The difference between *Jersey* and *Geordie Shore* lies in those moments when the groups are not seen while preparing for a night out on the town; those hours during which they are trying to get up with hang-overs, they are going out for breakfast, or lounging around the house. The women do not care what they look like. As glammed-up as they were the night before, we see Holly chill out on the couch in her sweatpants, make-up running down her face, without care. We see Vicky dressed in her sheets, because she “can’t be arsed to put on clothes.”<sup>28</sup> We see Charlotte take off her heels and extensions as soon as she enters the house, excited about the idea of now being able to just be herself. In this way, *Geordie Shore* is one of the few programs that show realistic portrayals of women’s bodies, portrayals of women not merely being reduced to their bodies.<sup>29</sup> We get to see these women as complete individuals, with storylines focusing on their personalities, their wits, and their competence in handling the jobs given to them by the boss of the house. Especially apparent outside of the house, all of the original *Shore*-women have turned their names into brands and have built enterprises consisting of clothing and nutritional ranges, merchandise, collaborations with famous brands, and (party) appearances. Furthermore, the show presents its viewers with a select but diverse range of body types:<sup>30</sup> from stick-thin to chubby, the girls celebrate one another’s curves

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27 In season 1, episode 1, Vinny says the following during a confessional: “I’m definitely a generational Italian. The guys with the blow-outs and the fake tan and the guys that wear lip-gloss and make-up...those aren’t Guidos! They’re retards!”

28 In season 6, episode 8, Vicky gets absolutely “mortal.” We see her during a confessional, still dressed in her sheets, smiling all the way through: “I’ve woke up and I’m still pissed. I can’t remember a fucking thing from last night, not a fucking sausage. If I’m this drunk now, how fucking drunk was I last night?”

29 H. M., “In Praise of *Geordie Shore* and the ‘Fat Slags’ the Media Love to Hate,” *The Vagenda*, accessed 10 May 2016.

30 Although there is diversity in terms of weight and body shape, all of the *Shore* women to date have been Caucasian.

(or lack thereof) and are always quick to defend each other in case an outsider dares to say anything about their bodies.

## HOUSEHOLD

In a patriarchal society, men dominate the public realm while women are relegated to the private one. This age-old gender division still holds true today, often based on the assumption that it is *natural* for women to cook, or that they have an innate propensity for scrubbing floors and changing diapers. An illuminating view on these roles is offered by Sarah F. Berk, whose 1985 *The Gender Factory* dealt with the allocation of household labor and corresponding attitudes in married couples.<sup>31</sup> Here, Berk found that the division of labor was less about who had more time or who had more skill, but was all about a “structure of normative expectations attached to the work as gendered”<sup>32</sup> that determined how much time was spent on chores and who would be doing them. Surprisingly enough, women themselves also justified their household involvement by claiming women should essentially be responsible for the home, even if they already had a full-time job or other obligations. Here, not only the categorization of housework as a *woman’s task* is relevant, but also the facts that women engage in these processes, and men do not draw on the *essential* nature of each sex.

*Geordie Shore* and *Jersey Shore* both show that household tasks are not strictly the domain of the female. Throughout the series, we see the boys voluntarily cleaning the houses, urging the girls to tidy up and do the dishes. In New Jersey, the men even spend their Sunday nights cooking elaborate, traditional Italian-style dinners for the rest of the *family*. At these dinners, attendance is mandatory, and both grocery shopping and cooking are done by the men with the utmost precision.<sup>33</sup> At no time, not during the three years of *Jersey Shore*’s existence and the long run of *Geordie Shore*, did any member of either sex ever allude to cleaning or cooking being something the women should do. The men complain because the

<sup>31</sup> West and Zimmerman, pp. 143–145.

<sup>32</sup> West and Zimmerman, pp. 143–145.

<sup>33</sup> Pamela L. Morris, “Odd or Ordinary: Social Comparisons Between Reality and Reality TV Families,” in *Reality Television: Oddities of Culture*, ed. Charissa K. Niedzwiecki (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2014), 143–162.

girls should clean up after themselves and stop holding food fights – not because the girls are most capable of doing so, but because they want their families to live comfortably. The Guidos even take this ethic of cleanliness and self-sufficiency to a whole new level by doing their laundry daily, not trusting anyone else to touch their shirts. This clothing-based lifestyle is echoed in the guys' GTL-mantra, which describes the routine that is the foundation of their masculine identity: Gym, Tanning, Laundry.

Perhaps housekeeping is the one category that shows the cast members of both series most strongly rejecting traditional feminine gender roles. While the kitchen is taken to be the designated realm of the woman, especially the traditional Italian mother-archetype, the *Jersey Shore*-girls do not have any interest in cooking, cleaning, grocery shopping, or dishwashing. Although many of the girls articulate at some point their feelings about older Italian women knowing how to cook and take care of their families, they themselves do not. None of the girls know how to cook, and they cannot be bothered to learn. Furthermore, they live in extremely messy rooms occasionally cleaned by the guys who cannot stand the fact that these girls “live like pigs.” Housekeeping does not seem to be a priority to these women, acknowledging that they have much better things to occupy themselves with. The *Geordie Shore* situation is identical in the sense that the girls make the mess and the boys clean it up because the thought of living in an untidy house drives them crazy. So much for biological determinism.

Of course, there are many more dimensions to this analysis. In both series, the women are often found peeing themselves and farting uncontrollably. The girls get into fights more often than the men do; they also swear more and use harsher language. Meanwhile, the boys are more pious and seem to be more sensitive and nurturing than their female counterparts. It shows what a uniquely weird concept we have here, and how it really provides viewers with a diverse range of possible behaviors for both men and women. It explores new horizons: while perhaps not being a complete gender revolution in its own right, the fact that this immensely popular reality television-show displays gender role subversion in a way that seems most natural is already indicative of broader, extremely important shifts in the societal mind.

## CONCLUSION

Over the past few sections, I have shown how both *Jersey Shore* and *Geordie Shore* are subtly at work in trying to subvert traditional notions of what it means to be either male or female in reality television as well as in real life. While bearing in mind the negative sides to the behavior of these young people, it would be wise to also look at them as inspirational models to challenge the status quo. Whether consciously or not, these people are actively involved in processes of meaning-making that have quickly become meaningful to millions of viewers. They provide viewers with a wide range of possible categories and rejection of the dominant stereotypes that are often celebrated in other shows; essentially, they perform non-traditional gender for a very diverse audience. Business is booming and the press is obsessed with them, showing signs that they really are doing something right. Regardless of the ways in which these young men and women present themselves, I have also argued that these series show educationally relevant tendencies. They teach us about society, about the hopes, needs, and desires of a diverse group of people who might see themselves honestly represented in television for the first time, or those of the groups who aggressively disidentify with the main characters. Whichever path is taken shows us what society's norms are, what behavior is passable and what behavior is not. It shows us gender roles played out in a 21st-century public arena. In their own ways, both *Geordie Shore* and *Jersey Shore* destabilize existing power structures through the offering up of alternative identities and making way for non-normative masculinity and femininity. Although such work has already been carried out by many different scholars within the field, the *Shore*-enterprise gives us the first look at gender-subversion at large: what it looks like when millions of people get a glimpse into the world of non-traditional gender roles. What promise such shows hold for the future is still uncertain, but one thing we do know is that nonconformity sells: entertainment value lies precisely within the oddity of the format. And this oddity, when mobilized efficiently, has the true potential to rise from the fringes of society to its center – to become the norm over time through exposure, rather than remaining a peculiar outlier.

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ZSUZSANNA NAGY-SZALÓKI

## “The Spinning Fairy in the Attic” Female Creativity and the Family Home in A.S. Byatt’s *The Children’s Book*

There is a paradox inherent in the title of A.S. Byatt’s *The Children’s Book*. On the one hand, it might promise the domestic intimacy of children’s fiction, which was flourishing in the Victorian era. On the other hand, Byatt’s novel can be read as a pastiche of the condition-of-England novel, aiming to give an all-encompassing image of turn-of-the-century English society, a society which seems to be far from the mostly feminine, domestic, innocent world evoked by children’s fiction. In this way, Byatt’s *The Children’s Book* does not keep to the traditional constraints of the genre indicated in the title, and steps out of the feminine sphere of domestic art to explore the whole social scenario. Through this, Byatt poses the questions: what is the place of women’s art in the public sphere, how is women’s literature implicated by various ideologies, and is it possible to go against the traditional social and narrative identity positions for women? I am going to examine this mainly through the character of the children’s book writer, Olive Wellwood. She and her husband, Humphry, are free-thinkers, socialists involved in the Fabian Society; they take part in the Arts and Crafts Movement and are surrounded by like-minded intellectuals and artists. It is this social context/background from which, breaking with the cult of the Angel in the House, the independent New Woman emerges. Indeed, in their Arts-and-Crafts home, Olive does not live the life of the domestic woman. She is the breadwinner of the family, who earns considerable fame and amount of money with her children’s stories. Yet, her art remains closely tied to the family home, which is both a space of creation and the subject matter of her tales.

In what follows, I analyse how this place positions her and her art within or in contrast to the tradition which frames women's art inside the domestic sphere and to what extent it enables her to break away from or re-fashion this tradition. I will argue that in Byatt's novel, the house is revealed as an inherently intertextual space composed of past images and narratives connected to the family home and women's role inscribed into it. Just like Olive in her fairy tales, Byatt uses and reuses these fragments to create a narrative space that, on the one hand, positions her in this tradition, but via a constant reframing also opens up the finiteness of these feminine positions.

The relationship of the Wellwood family's home to Victorian middle-class architecture foregrounds the controversial position of Olive's art in late-Victorian society. While the house is both geographically as well as architecturally distant from the Victorian bourgeois milieu, its textual imagery at several points evokes the Victorian middle-class family home, which was considered as a haven of privacy presided over by the Angel in the House. Olive, who once calls herself the "spinning fairy in the attic" (358),<sup>1</sup> indeed considers herself as the inner spirit of the house, and her art is also very closely connected to this domestic space. Thus, the novel clearly establishes a dialogue with Victorian ideas of female creativity, according to which women's art is implicated within the very intimate space of the family home, which stands in a binary opposition to the public space. As Talia Schaffer points out,

[b]y the nineteenth century, the household was supposedly the expression of the woman's personality [...] Since the 'housewife' was held responsible for her domicile, the condition of her walls and furniture formed a direct moral judgement on her and on her adherence to bourgeois ideals of thriftiness and cleanliness.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All parenthesised references are to this edition: A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book* (London: Vintage, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Talia Schaffer, "Not at All Akin to That Homespun Cult': The Domestic Craftswoman and the Aesthetic Connoisseur," in *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 73-121, p. 74.

Thus, the Victorian bourgeois ideal assigns the home as women's natural environment. Their choices of furniture and wallpaper, as well as their creative activities like needlework, assigned them some agency within this space. However, they not only fashioned their home but also themselves as subjects of the patriarchal order of bourgeois society and as the invisible souls of the house, which supports the general image society created for them as Angels of the House. Thad Logan draws attention to this paradox claiming that in their homes, women were "inmates, but they were also its producers, its curators, and its ornaments."<sup>3</sup> In other words, as Mark Wigley points out, "[t]he woman maintains a system without access to its secrets,"<sup>4</sup> the secrets being closed up in *his* study. So while the male head of the middle-class family exercised his creative powers in the silence of his study, female aestheticism was expressed through the handcrafted, home-made presence of everyday objects, tapestries, and textiles. She fashioned a space where she had no room of her own. Her passive, invisible presence was mythicised just like the home she created, which, as Ruskin in *Sesame and Lilies* famously put it, was "always around her. The stars only may be over her head; the glowworm in the night-cold grass may be the only fire at her foot, but home is yet wherever she is."<sup>5</sup> The home as a mythical, halo-like presence surrounding women has an even more powerful effect than the home as a physical presence, maintaining women's domestic confinement even in the public sphere.

Parallel to the image of women as invisible maintainers of the material economy of the house, women's literary creativity was also closely tied to the narrative space of the middle-class family home. Either as authors of novels of manners or domestic novels that never step beyond the seemingly innocent chit-chat of drawing rooms, or writers of moral tales for children, their imagination was considered as inalienable from the private, familiar sphere and, therefore, as the Other of the public and overtly political masculine novelistic tradition best represented by the condition-of-England novel. Yet, the self-evidence of this neat binary is destabilised by the paradoxical nature of the English novelistic tradition itself. As Tamás Bényei highlights, these domestic genres, as typically feminine, are constructed as

3 Thad Logan, *The Victorian Parlour* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 26.

4 Mark Wigley, "Untitled: The Housing of Gender," in *Sexuality and Space*, ed. Beatriz Colomina (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001), 327-389, p. 348.

5 John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies: Rethinking the Western Tradition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 78.

the Others of the tradition. However, he points out that they are also considered as emblematic representatives of the very same tradition.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, as Bényei goes on to argue, another paradox inherent in the domestic novel lies between the postulation of the home as isolated from the major processes of history and politics and the presentation of the political practices connected to the home (such as gender roles, relatives, and household roles) as apolitical and ahistorical, and, as such, universal.<sup>7</sup>

Byatt's novel brings to the surface the paradoxes related to the family house, which has a dual nature. While it has its "carved and crafted presence" (141), it also reveals an "imagined, interpenetrating world" (141) composed of the threads of Olive's tales, which reach much further than the physical boundaries of the house itself and get entangled in the web of society. Also, the house reveals the sediments of cultural acts and narratives that have become attached to it as a cultural product throughout history, thus enabling a fruitful cultural dialogue between the various discourses surrounding the home. In addition, Todefright is presented as an essentially intertextual space, which evokes Marko Juvan's ideas on the close relationship between texts and spaces: "intertextuality is inscribed in 'extratextual space' [...] due to the very 'essence' of the space: it is always multiple, it exists only as a co-presence of disparate acts, gestures, messages, and symbolic forms."<sup>8</sup> Byatt's novel also proves that extratextual or physical space like the family home never exists in itself. It is always already interwoven with the previous plots attached to the family home. We can see this in how the physical architecture of the house, at the intersection of the physical and the textual, the real and the imaginary, is inseparably interwoven with narratives of the domestic as well as of the public. By exposing the blueprint of the family home as a social construct and by revealing the intertextual nature of space, the novel also opens up a critical space to look at what spaces and identity positions these discourses

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6 Tamás Bényei, *Az ártatlan ország: Az angol regény 1945 után [The Innocent Country: The English Novel after 1945]* (Debrecen: Debrecen University Press, 2009), p. 104. See for example the critical reception of Jane Austen, who, on the one hand, is seen as one of the most typical representatives of the English novelistic tradition, and, on the other hand, as the feminine Other, in contrast to the masculine *norm* of the English novel.

7 Bényei, pp. 107–108.

8 Marko Juvan, "Spaces of Intertextuality/The Intertextuality of Space," *Primerjalna književnost* Vol. 27, Special issue (2004), 85–96, p. 92, *Academia.edu*, accessed 13 July 2015.

designate for women, especially for women as artists, within and outside the boundaries of the family home.

The physical appearance of the house with its Arts-and-Crafts design is very emphatically presented as different from the urban, bourgeois architecture of the Victorian family home. Although the countryside has become a desirable retreat for the Victorians as well, Todefright does not follow the architecture of the well-planned Victorian suburb:

Todefright was an old Kentish farmhouse, built of stone and timber. It had meadows and a river before it, woods rising uphill behind it, and a wide view to the high edge of the Weald across the river. The house had been tactfully extended and modernised by Lethaby, in the Arts and Crafts style, respecting (and also creating) odd-shaped windows and eaves, twisting stairs, nooks, crannies and exposed roof-beams. The front door, solid oak, opened into a modern version of a medieval hall, with settles and alcoves, a large hand-crafted dining-table, and a long dresser, shining with lustre ware. Beyond this were a (small) panelled library, which was also Olive's study, and a billiard-room, which was Humphry's when he was at home. (17)

As seen in this description, the house is designed to fit the needs of a progressive-minded family, where the mother can have *a room of her own*, a space of creation, which is no longer the privilege of the male head of the family. Also, the house seemingly melts into the surrounding countryside, which is a symbolic move away from the urban atmosphere. Yet, we are also informed that this effect is achieved and constructed through very conscious artwork, blurring the natural with the artificial. Thus, the suburban home—which was typically constructed as the place where the true nature of man could strive, both physically and symbolically far from the sphere of culture and politics—is exposed as a cultural artefact. Parallel to this, the surrounding nature is also revealed as a cultural product, contesting the myth of an unspoilt or innocent countryside. One example for this is the presentation of the Todefright garden. While the plants are mostly left to grow freely in a sweet disorder, the description of the garden soon invites the image of a fictional garden, or even the original Garden of Eden. As one of the Wellwood children explains, "[t]hese two trees are the magic trees from the story.



The golden apple and the silver pear" (37). Thus, the garden evokes the primeval innocence of nature and man, but at the same time it foreshadows the fall of this innocence as it contains the potential repetition of the original story of the fall.

The above description of the house also shows the ambiguous relationship of the Arts and Crafts Movement to tradition. On the one hand, in many ways it aimed to break away from the Victorian aesthetic and social ideals. As highlighted in the novel, the movement was associated with socialism, with a novel understanding of art as work for the public good, and with the revision of the labour division between the sexes. Indeed, female artists formed an important part of the movement. In the novel, too, several women become successful makers of marketable jewellery and textiles. One could argue that women's art finally made its way into the public sphere. Yet, as Anthea Callen suggests, although it is now for the marketplace, "such work could be seen as an extension of traditional feminine accomplishments and of woman's accepted social sphere; it would enhance rather than threaten the role designated as 'natural' for the Victorian woman."<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Schaffer adds that the previously feminine responsibility of fashioning the home is gradually appropriated by male aesthetes, like William Morris and Walter Crane. While they turned away from the homespun cult of Victorian women, whom they considered as amateurs, they reached into the distant past for inspiration and "placed the craft tradition firmly in the Middle Ages."<sup>10</sup> This way, as Schaffer goes on, they "turned the home into the extension of market economy and the museum, the male-identified public sphere with which they were already familiar. The reign of the homemade craft gradually gave way to the new regime of financially valuable collectibles."<sup>11</sup> Thus, the home, especially the parlour, which previously demonstrated woman's domestic creativity, became a museum showcase.

The notion of the house turned into a private museum is also emphasised in the novel. Right at the beginning, we encounter one of the main characters of the novel, Philip, a working class boy, who escaped from his family and is now living in the basement storerooms of the South Kensington Museum. The public space of the museum is thus immediately personalised. In the next scene, on

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9 Anthea Callen, "Sexual Division of Labour in the Arts and Crafts Movement," *Oxford Art Journal* 3.1 (1980), 22-27, p. 23, *JSTOR*, accessed 28 May 2015.

10 Schaffer, p. 75.

11 Schaffer, p. 78.

the other hand, we can see how a private home can be turned into a museum. Prosper Cain, the Special Keeper of Precious Metals at the South Kensington Museum, acts as a curator in his own home, as he gives a guided tour to Olive through his private collection of precious objects. Also, all through the novel, there can hardly be mention of a domestic object without the necessary inventory description of the item, like in the following instance: "He stood with his teacup (Minton, Dresden shape, painted with pansies) and spoke in German" (69). The interconnectedness of the house and the museum, of public and private collections, evokes Baudrillard's statement that "the museum, instead of being circumscribed as a geometric site, is everywhere now, like a dimension of life."<sup>12</sup> This way, all houses in the novel exhibit a symbolic order through their object-world. In this simulacrum of a space, the dwellers might be just as lifeless as the objects on display.<sup>13</sup>

The home of the fictional Wellwood family, with its rich object-world, with several works of art on display, can also be seen as a museum that displays the symbolic structures of society working within the very private sphere of the home. The novel, by blurring the boundaries between public and private, poses the question of whether women can be the curators of this collection and whether the symbolic order inscribed into the family sphere can be challenged and reshaped by the creative energies of its female inhabitants. I would argue that it offers an ambiguous position for women and women's art, partly recreating the tradition it wants to break away from, but also allowing a critical distance from it as the text exposes its architecture.

*The Children's Book* refuses to present a neat, traditional family structure with clear-cut roles. For example, in the novel we can find a fictional excerpt from *The Lady Magazine*, in which a journalist flatteringly writes about Olive's house as the ideal retreat and inspiration for a woman writer: "She lives in a perfect house for a writer at once so enchanting and so down to earth" (527). She also admires the way the family occupies the house: the seven children are not banished to a nursery but can freely run about. Similarly, there are no separate spaces for man and woman. This all suggests a loosening of the strict Victorian social

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<sup>12</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> The name of the Wellwoods' house, Todefricht, containing the German word for death, might refer to this.

architecture, which would give way to a freer flow of creative energies for the artist, even or especially if she is a woman.

This unusual family structure, expressed in the structure of the house as well, is further complicated as the figures of the mother and the artist are duplicated, the two figures representing different attitudes to tradition. Olive is the official wife of Humphry Wellwood, but her spinster sister, Violet, also lives under the same roof. To make matters more complex, they both have children from Humphry, who, however, are completely unaware of their real parentage until quite late in their lives.<sup>14</sup> Of the two sisters, it is Violet who is more like the Victorian Angel. Responsible for the day-to-day running of the house and the everyday duties of childcare, she is the maintainer of the material economy of the family home, who at first sight acts more like a housekeeper than a family member. Although she does not lack skills in needlework, her creativity is more like that of the traditional Victorian housewife, for example, turning old dresses into new costumes for the children. While carrying out her daily work, she is more closely associated with the material life of the house as the maintainer of the system but without access to its secrets. Even her death goes more or less unnoticed in the family—and also for the reader. Almost as a side remark, the narrator informs us with cold irony that “Violet, coming in with cream cakes on a plate said ‘Ah’ and fell forward, crashing to the ground with her face in the cream, on top of one of Philip Warren’s early Dungeness plates, decorated with seaweeds and umbrellifers” (542). As the narratorial attention quickly wanders from the sad fact of her death to the pattern on the plate, Violet leaves this domestic world as unnoticed as she lived, literally melting into the object-world of the house.

Her sister, Olive Wellwood, while also closely associated with the home and its objects, has a more complex relationship to the house. While Violet is clearly identified with the objects on display, Olive has a less clear-cut relationship to these objects:

She took pleasure, too, in the inert solidity of glass panes and polished furniture and rows of ordered books around her, and the magic trees of life woven in glowing colours on the rugs at her feet. She never got used to

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<sup>14</sup> In this respect, the family resembles the family of Edith Nesbit, the children’s book writer and co-founder of the Fabian Society, on whom Byatt partly modelled Olive’s character. The mother of her husband’s illegitimate children lived with them as their housekeeper.

owning these things. Never saw them simply as household stuff [...] They still had the quality Aladdin's palace must have had for him and the princess, when the genie erected it out of nothing. (141)

For her, the things in the house have a fable-like, magical quality added to their physical presence. She thinks of the house as having "two aspects, its carved and crafted presence, doors, windows, chimneys, stairs, and the world she has constructed in, through, and under it, the imagined, interpenetrating world, with its secret doors into tunnels, and caverns, the otherworld under the green fairy hill" (141). Many of her stories, especially the interminable flow of tales that she writes for her children, not originally meant for publishing, are closely connected to the magical potentials of her home. They are set in an alternative world which is interwoven with the physical presence of the house. The entrances of this world are found in quite mundane objects in their home, which thus becomes both her space of creation and the inspiration and subject matter for her art.

This might underpin the Victorian image of women's creativity. However, Olive's confession in an interview complicates this analogy: "Well, I sometimes feel, stories are the inner life of this house. A kind of spinning of energy. I am this spinning fairy in the attic, I am Mother Goose quacking away what sounds like comforting chatter but is really—is really what holds it all together [...] Well, it makes money, it does hold it all together" (358). She uses Victorian imagery—like Mother Goose or the invisible spinning fairy—to position her own art, yet she makes a gesture that at once also alienates her from this tradition. Her ironic note at the end of the quotation—"it makes money, it does hold it all together"—suggests that her art makes her the chief breadwinner of the family. Her position at the top of the house, the attic, also adds to this paradox. The symbolic place she occupies is traditionally connected to the confinement of women (such as the madwoman in the attic), or it is designated for servants. Yet, through her art, this room becomes the economic centre of the home. In addition, although she has a study of her own, she often writes in the intimate seclusion of their bedroom, which ties her art to domestic fertility, but it is a fertility that also provides for the financial well-being of the family. In many ways, thus, she is presented as different from the ordinary figure of Violet. Yet, echoing Virginia Woolf's idea

that “[t]he extraordinary woman depends on the ordinary woman,”<sup>15</sup> their lives and their arts are inseparable from each other. For example, Olive’s artistic work is made possible by the almost invisible domestic work of her sister. Also, her narrative art parallels Violet’s art with textiles. It is not by chance that storytelling is often expressed in the novel with the words *spinning* or *weaving*.

These metaphors highlight Olive’s similarity to her sister, who also uses and fashions the objects found in the house, thus contributing to the maintenance of the domestic system. Olive’s work, however, goes beyond this. Using and reusing the material objects and the physical architecture of the house, her art also exposes and refashions the symbolic architecture of the home. Olive and thus the reader are always aware of the symbolic, fictional quality inherent in the carved and crafted presence of the objects in the house, which often evoke mythical stories. Olive uses these decorative elements to create her own mythical world:

The real world sprouted stories wherever she looked at it. Benedict Fludd’s watery pot at the turn of the stairs, for instance. She looked casually at the translucent tadpoles and had invented a whole waterworld of swimming water-nymphs threatened by a huge water-snake, or by that old terror, Jenny Greenteeth, lurking in the weeds and sifting them with her crooked fingers, before she reached the landing. (82)

This mythical world, moreover, is revealed as the ordering force of the domestic system. Olive, contemplating her own art, claims that “[m]yths have a habit of winding themselves around us” (517). And indeed, her children’s lives are all strangely entangled in the web of the stories she spins. One of her children, the eldest son, Tom, is so deeply immersed in, even addicted to, his own story, *Tom Underground*, that the real world for him gradually fades away: “Tom reading Tom Underground was real [...] Tom chanting declensions, Tom cleaning washbasins and listening to smutty jokes was a simulacrum, a wind-up doll in schoolboy shape” (198). But the metaphoric threads of her stories go beyond the domestic, and are woven into the fabric of society and history. The image of the underground labyrinth, for instance, which is the scene of Tom’s fictional adventures, returns in the novel’s description of the basement of the South Kensington Museum or in

15 Virginia Woolf, *Women and Writing*, ed. Michele Barrett (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1979), p. 44.

the horror of First-World-War trenches. This way, Olive's domestic and seemingly innocent art is revealed as the structuring force of the whole text, which blurs the easy categorisation of private and public spaces and also the distinction between physical and mythical, real and symbolic. Also, this might be interpreted as an ironic note on Ruskin's image of the home as a protective halo around women that goes with them wherever they go. Olive indeed spreads the halo of her stories all around her, but this extension of her imaginary domestic world far into the public narratives subverts rather than supports the neat binary propagated by Ruskin.

Moreover, the exposure of the family house as a textual construct reveals the contesting discourses and narratives defining male and female subject positions and female creativity. For instance, the house as an intertextual space and Olive's fictional life within it evoke a plethora of literary texts. One of them might be a short story by Edith Nesbit, "The Town in the Library, in the Town in the Library," which is about two children who go on an adventure inside a city built of books, which is a library inside the city inside the library.<sup>16</sup> Byatt's novel presents a similarly complicated structure of multiple embeddings of texts in texts, spaces in texts, and vice versa. As another intertextual reference, the fairy in the attic spinning her web of tales might remind the reader of the mythical story of Arachne in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which Arachne's skills and hybris as a female artist and the subject matter of her art transgress against the gods, and she is severely punished. Another text evoking the same mythical story is an emblematic poem of the Victorian era: Alfred Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott." The poem has often been read as the expression of Victorian gender politics, where the lady, in a place secluded from the patriarchal world around her, is condemned to weave her tapestry, copying a copy—a mirror image—of the real world she is not allowed to access. In Byatt's novel, Olive as another version of the Lady of Shalott uses the texts—or representations—available for her, yet the threads of her story also reach into the world around her.

In another intertextual reference, in the upstairs bedroom, which is her most fertile space of creation, the spinning fairy in the attic slowly transforms into the *madwoman in the attic*. Unable to cope with the death of her most beloved son, she retreats into a self-imposed isolation, turning to alcohol. The self-evidence of this gothic image is, however, also twisted in the novel. To a certain extent, it

16 Edith Nesbit, "The Town in the Library, in the Town in the Library," in *Nine Unlikely Tales* (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1938), 243-266, *Project Gutenberg*, accessed 10 September 2015.

is Olive herself who drives her son towards suicide when she ends and cuts the fictional strings of his story. This act, although inadvertent, seriously questions the innocence of her art, which has been categorised as “comforting chatter” (358). At the same time, finishing Tom’s story also paralyses her as she is unable to spin further stories, and this means that she herself fades out of the text. Echoing the ending of the Tennyson poem, Olive’s story also suggests the impossibility to break away from the textual world and to radically break up with tradition and prescribed narrative positions for women. However, this does not break the economy of the novel as text, which seems to follow the economy of Olive’s art. Byatt keeps reworking the web of cultural texts. Through a constant recycling, juxtaposing, and blending the traditional narrative and discursive identity positions for men and women, the finiteness of these is broken. This way, a narrative space opens up, which might be described by Elizabeth Grosz’s term of the “outside,” referring to a paradoxical position which never exists in itself but gains meaning in its difference from an inside.<sup>17</sup> It is a place where “[s]omething is lost—the immediate intimacy of an inside position; and something is gained—the ability to critically evaluate that position and to possibly compare it to others.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Byatt’s *The Children’s Book*, thwarting the expectations based on the title, refuses to lull the reader into a state of intimacy. Instead, it creates a textual outside to the traditional narratives inherent in the domestic space of the family home.

Thus, in Byatt’s novel, the image of the house, closely tied up with women’s artistic creativity, is far from the intimate, homely space of domestic bliss. Exposing the imaginary world permeating the physical architecture of the family home and blurring the boundaries of private and public, real and imaginary, *The Children’s Book* reveals the fictive nature of the structure of society and the gender roles defined in it. While reusing and refashioning the narratives connected to the domestic sphere and women’s art that is traditionally implicated in it, Byatt creates a continuous dialogue between these texts, preventing them from becoming finite because, echoing Olive Wellwood’s self-motivation for writing, “[i]f she stopped spinning, the thing would sink” (425).

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<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, “Introduction,” in *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2001), xv–xxi, p. xv.

<sup>18</sup> Grosz, p. xv.

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The essays in this volume are all selected papers from the conference *Gendered Identities in Contemporary Literary and Visual Cultures*, organized in June 2015 in Budapest, Hungary, by the Narratives of Culture and Identity Research Group. The authors deal with a wide array of gender issues in modern and postmodern English literature, contemporary popular culture, and postcolonial and Eastern European studies. The essays are arranged into three larger chapters based on their subject matter: “Dissecting Identities” examines gendered identities in various literary contexts; “Creating Social Identities” looks at the function of society and culture in identity formation; and “Reinventing Gender Roles” deals with subversive uses of gender representation. The collection displays several applications of gender studies as well as the authors’ enthusiastic engagement with the many directions in which gender studies can take us.